THE
SKY SO
HEAVY
CLAIRE
ZORN

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

For Fin it's just like any other day – racing for the school bus, bluffing his way through class, and trying to remain cool in front of the most sophisticated girl in his universe. Only it's not like any other day because, on the other side of the world, nuclear missiles are being detonated.

When Fin wakes up the next morning, it's dark, bitterly cold, and snow is falling. There's no internet, no phone, no TV, no power, and no parents. Nothing Fin's learned in school could have prepared him for this. With his parents missing and dwindling food and water supplies, Fin and his younger brother Max must find a way to survive all on their own. When things are at their most desperate, where can you go for help?

This haunting dystopian novel thrillingly and realistically looks at a nuclear winter from an Australian perspective.

- Claire Zorn
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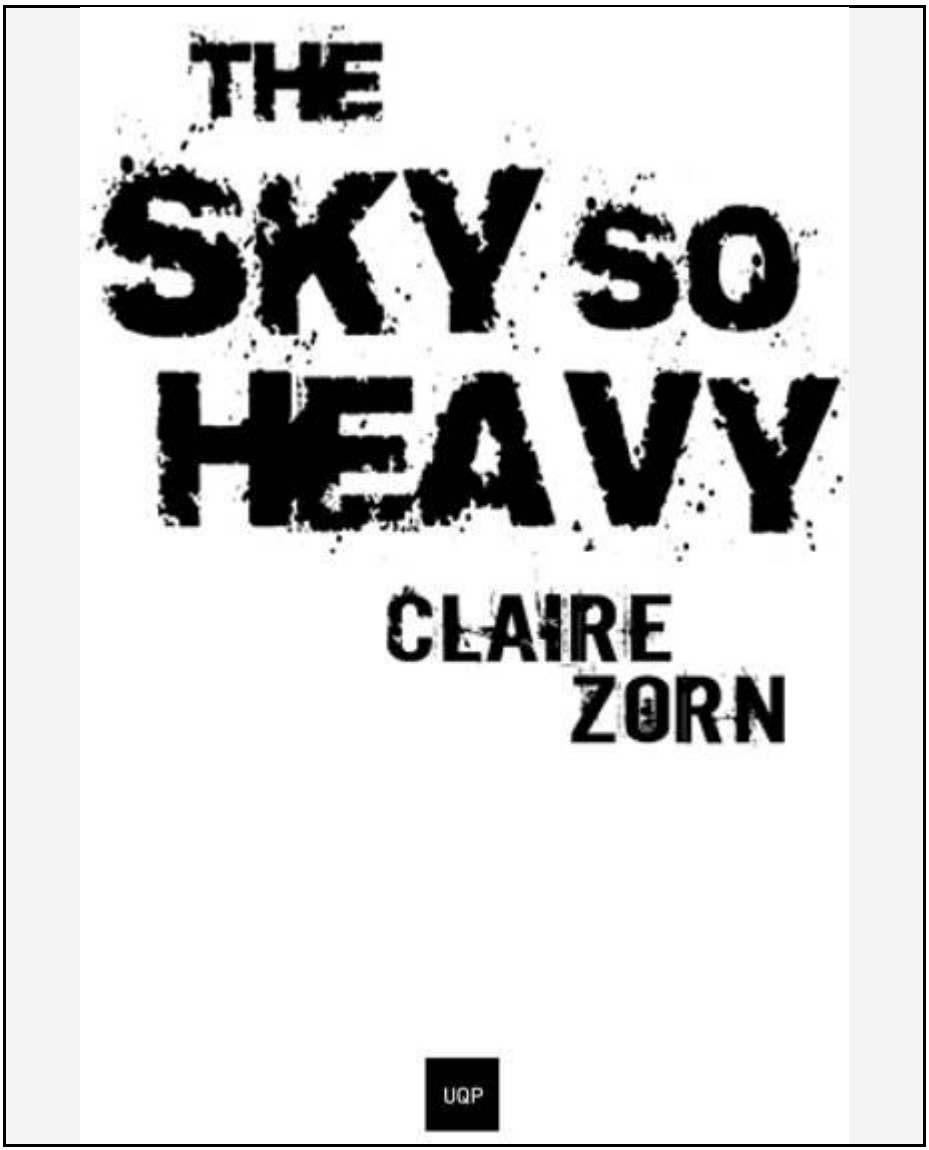
Claire Zorn
THE SKY SO HEAVY

For Nathan, always.



One

There are two things I know right now: one is that a guy is holding a gun to my head, the other is that I don't want to die. I guess I could try to look at it from the positive side: I've made it seventeen years without anyone trying to kill me. But it's hard to maintain a sunny outlook when there's a guy threatening to shoot you.

He yells at me in a foreign language and the only word I recognise is my brother's name. I don't know where Max is. I feel utterly responsible for him. I *am* utterly responsible for him. When I think about that I automatically think of my mum and it's not helpful to think of your mum in a situation like this. It makes you want to cry.

I'm not the kind of person people normally want to shoot in the head. I didn't used to be. But a lot of things are different now; the need for food makes people do crazy things. I don't mean crazy like my step-mum used to get when she'd only eaten one rice cracker all day and couldn't remember our names or where she parked the car. No, not that sort of crazy. It's a raw, blind sort of crazy that'd make you throw your step-mum off the car park roof if you thought it would mean an extra bowl of rice in your belly.

To understand how I got here, we have to go back to the start. And it's going to hurt. Thinking about those last days – before this all began – always hurts.

But it's all I have.

Three months ago I woke up in the morning and it was the same as any other day. I had slept in and if I didn't get my arse out the door soon I was going to miss the bus. I got out of bed and rescued my school pants and shirt from the pile of clothes that lived at the foot of my bed.

You can probably imagine the morning routine stuff; Kara, my step-mum, was there, making some sort of guava and wheatgrass concoction. (People often used to mistake Kara for my sister, if you get my drift.) My little brother Max was eating toast, and there was no sign of my dad. He had recently taken up jogging in an effort to prove to the world he wasn't too old for Kara. It was like a feel-good cereal commercial, except there was no smiling and there was no cereal. I didn't have time to eat; I skolled a glass of juice and bolted out the door.

I lived in the Blue Mountains, about an hour's drive west of Sydney. Between here and the city there were acres and acres of suburbia. The main difference between this place and the suburbs used to be that we had a national park instead of housing estates. Plus

it was whiter up here than a loaf of Tip Top – still is, I guess. There's a highway that snakes up through the mountains with townships most of the way along it. Tourist brochures used to really push the whole 'village atmosphere' thing, which really only meant that the trains came less often and there was only one McDonald's. My town wasn't high enough up to be a touristy place though; it was the place you drove through to get somewhere else, somewhere with better views and more kangaroo key rings.

I've lived here my whole life, even stayed in the same house after my parents split two years ago. My mum left to live in the city. She's an advisor to the government and had to travel to Canberra a lot. It made sense for her to be near the airport. That was her reasoning anyway. It was probably also pretty convenient that her boyfriend had a shiny inner-city pad.

I had been working pretty hard at trying to guilt either of my parents into buying me a car, post divorce is the optimum time for that sort of thing. It hadn't worked and I was forced to catch the school bus. The bus did have its perks, namely Lucy Tenningworth.

My bus stop was right near where I am now – at the top of my street. There's a strip of five shops, one was a little supermarket (there wasn't a whole lot of 'super' about it), three other shops that had been empty for years and the last one was a Chinese restaurant; the kind where you could pick up a packet of weed with your chicken chow mein. It's not like my town was some sort of seedy crack-hole, it was more that, other than bushwalking, there wasn't a whole lot for the 'young people' to do. So a side business in recreational drugs was a pretty smart move.

When I got to the top of the hill I saw that I hadn't missed the bus. There were about five kids standing in the drizzle, waiting. The rain wasn't heavy enough for an umbrella, but heavy enough to make you blink continuously like a moron.

Lucy wasn't waiting in the rain. She was a bit away from the bus stop, leaning against the wall of the supermarket, under the awning with her ankles crossed. (I don't know what it is about girls' ankles; they make me crazy.) She was reading a book and looked up when I came toward the bus stop. I pretended I hadn't noticed her at first – I didn't want to appear too keen.

I noticed Lucy Tenningworth on the first day of year eleven, the same time as every other male in the school. She had come from a girls' school that only went to year ten, and instantly eclipsed every other girl I had ever had a thing for. Lucy turned up with her chipped black nail polish and a well-thumbed copy of *A Clockwork Orange*. She was allocated the seat next to mine in modern history. She had clear, pale skin and legs that I knew would cause me some serious

concentration issues. Mrs Bryan, our teacher, announced to Lucy that I was her 'star pupil', at which point I think I actually physically shrank with embarrassment. Mrs Bryan went back to the lesson and Lucy leaned across and wrote something across the page of my textbook. *Number one? I'm going to kick your arse*. She raised an eyebrow and gave me a little smirk. I somehow managed to collect myself and wrote *I'd like to see you try* on her book. Her response? *Game on*. Her smile was ridiculous.

'Hello,' I said after a bit.

'Hello yourself.' She gave me a smile and turned back to her book.

I waited a few moments. 'Beautiful weather.'

'Isn't it just. I loathe winter.'

'Hey, aren't we supposed to be going to the library this arvo? Research?'

'Indeed.' Her long dark hair was pinned in elaborate coils behind her ears. She tilted her face up to look at me. 'Still free? Or are you otherwise engaged – rugby practice or something?'

I laughed. 'No, they still won't let me on the team. I'm too intimidating for the other guys.'

'Well, let's do it then. Although I really think you're wasting your time. We both know I'm going to kick your skinny arse.'

'You keep saying these things, but I'm yet to see the evidence.'

'Oh, you'll see the evidence, my friend.'

The bus came over the hill. Lucy closed her book and tucked it into her satchel with a sigh.

'How many more days of this do we have to endure?' she asked.

'Too many.'

The bus pulled to a stop. We watched as the year sevens scrambled for their bags, as if the bus leaving them behind would be a bad thing. At the last possible moment we made our way over. I stood aside and let Lucy get on before me. She took one of the last free seats and I sat next to her. The bus shuddered and pulled away from the kerb.

'So, do you think the world's going to end?' I said.

'Beg yours?'

'The nuke testing. Was on the news last night.'

'How could I forget; our impending doom! I wonder when it will occur to everyone that the best way to solve differences might not be to annihilate each other. I'm taking comfort in the knowledge that we are on the other side of the world.'

'Depends what you class as the other side of the world. It's a bit too close for comfort in my book.'

'If the world is going to end I don't want to spend my last days writing a history essay. Although…' she paused, 'if I don't do it and

the world doesn't end then I will fail and you will be at the top of the class. And we can't have that, can we?' She glanced at me and the corner of her mouth curved up a little.

'I would be honoured if you would spend your last moments researching with me,' I said.

'Hmm? And what would we be researching exactly?'

I nearly fell off my seat. She looked casually out the window with a little smirk. I had absolutely nothing to say. I cleared my throat. The bus pulled up at another stop and more kids got on. It was standing room only except for the one seat next to Arnold Wong. Kids crammed on and swayed in the aisles but no one sat next to Arnold Wong. No one ever did.

Arnold Wong had been at my primary school; he joined my class in year three. I don't know if it was because he had a funny name or because he had skin a few shades darker than everyone else and thick black hair that stood straight up like a Chia Pet's, but everyone took to hating Arnold Wong from that very first day he arrived. Arnold was the carrier of Arnold-germs that could be transmitted by standing behind him in the canteen line, talking to him in a non-hostile way or touching any of his stuff. Once you got Arnold-germs you were considered almost as bad as Arnold himself and subjected to taunts for a few days afterwards. Arnold seemed to take all of this pretty well for a few years. He was even considerate enough to step off a bit of pavement if you happened to step onto it, so that you'd be spared the burden of carrying his germs. But one day in year six, as he was walking down the corridor, someone must have said something – added a final straw to his load – and he put two palms against the plate-glass window and rammed his head through it. He stood there in a pool of shards, blood dripping from his scalp and no one said anything until Alex Loke yelled out, 'Hey, it's Wong King Kong!' Alex Loke wasn't a dickhead in my book, he was my mate (aka Lokey) and he was no different to any of us. We laughed nervously and then a teacher came running down the corridor and questions were asked and Arnold was sent to the principal's office via the sick bay. Afterwards, everything carried on like it always had, except with the occasional yell of 'Hey Wong King Kong, there's a window – why don't you put your head through it?' I'm not going to pretend I was any different. I said crap to him. I pelted him with spitballs. It was dangerous not to.

It would be nice to say that we hit high school and things changed for Arnold. But traditions stuck, rituals stuck. No one ever sat next to Arnold on the bus. It was bullshit and it was pathetic but I was also part of it.

The bus rounded a corner and my knee touched Lucy's. (She was wearing black tights; she wore them every day of the school year, no matter what the weather was like. She once said no girl over the age of fourteen should wear ankle socks.) We were approaching the school and I didn't want to get off the bus.

'Is this nuclear missile fiasco actually something we have to worry about?' Lucy asked. 'Haven't loads of countries tested nuclear weapons?'

'Yeah, but it's who's doing the testing that's the worry, apparently. My mum's a bit paranoid about it. Disasters are her speciality.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, she has a PhD in disaster response management or something. Works with the government and the defence force on strategies to stop human extinction if there's a natural disaster. Or nuclear disaster. She's a real light-hearted sort of person.'

'Sounds like it. Not a job I'd envy. What would you do anyway? In the event that the whole human population faces extinction?'

'Are there zombies involved?'

'No zombies.'

'Is Will Smith there?'

'No Will Smith.'

'Bear Grylls?'

'No Bear Grylls either, my friend. Just your sorry skinny arse. I'm serious. What would you do?'

'I don't know. I'd try to help my family, I guess. Beyond that? I really don't know. You're putting a kind of dampener on my morning with this stuff, you know that?'

'I'd say your morning was already on the damp side.'

'Very clever. What would you do? Mass destruction, you've only got a screwdriver and a box of sultanas on hand. Go.'

'Sultanas? Eeeew. I would stab the nearest person with the screwdriver and eat them instead of the sultanas.'

'You don't really do things by halves.'

She laughed and I liked that I could make her do that. 'Precisely, my friend. Seriously, should we be worried? And would the government even tell us if we should be? I think they'd put on a smiley face just to avoid panic.'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Are you going to the march tomorrow?'

There was a march planned for the city. The idea being that if enough people turned up with placards our government would impose trade sanctions against the offending country.

‘Dunno. It’s not as if the government’s going to notice. And as if they’d stop testing missiles just because Australia doesn’t want to play any more.’

‘You don’t think there’s any point.’

‘Not really.’

‘Right. What do you think would happen if everyone had that attitude? Apathy is what leads to this stuff in the first place.’ She wasn’t smiling any more.

‘I take it you’re going?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘And your opinion of me has just plummeted.’

She narrowed her eyes and gave me a half smile. ‘Yes, but not beyond repair.’

The bus pulled up at the school. We got off and started to walk in together.

Lucy nodded toward my sketchbook. I carried it under my arm in the hope it made me look thoughtful.

‘Give me a look,’ she said.

‘What? Nah. It’s boring as.’

Her mouth again curved into that mischievous smile. It was a total turn-on and she knew it. ‘Come on, a peek.’

‘Nah. Hey, did we have homework for English?’

‘You’re trying to change the subject.’

‘I’m not, I—’

She reached over, snatched the sketchbook away and skipped a few metres ahead. She opened it up and my heart ended up somewhere near my tonsils.

‘Hey,’ I said, trying to laugh convincingly. ‘Come on, hand it over. You don’t want to see it, it’s crap.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that, thank you very much.’

‘It’s just roughs for my major work – a graphic novel. The characters are based on people I know.’

‘Is that guy our bus driver?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Wow. You’re right, it is crap.’

‘Hey!’ I elbowed her and she laughed.

‘I’m joking. It’s really good.’

She kept leafing through the pages, they were dog-eared and almost etched through with ink where I’d reworked stuff over and over. I tried to get the book back but she dodged away and kept looking. I swallowed hard.

‘That’s all really, there’s nothing else…’

And then she got to the page. She stopped walking. I felt myself melting with embarrassment. I wanted to seep into the ground. She

looked at the drawing without speaking. I'd sketched her one day when I was sitting behind her on the bus. It was of the side of her face and neck. My breath felt all boxed up and tight in my chest.

She turned her lovely eyes up to me and bit her lip.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm not stalking you, really. There's this famous drawing by a French guy, Toulouse-Lautrec. It's a profile of a woman called Madame Lucy. I was thinking about it once when I was sitting behind you and… I'm sorry.'

She smiled slowly. 'Well, it's not very good,' she said. 'I'm not that pretty.'

I gently took the book from her. 'I'll be the judge of that.'

She grinned and looked away. Then she elbowed me in the ribs. We walked in silence until we got to her homeroom for roll call.

'If your mum calls and tells you that chaos is going to break out, will you let me know?' she asked.

'I'll let you know. Bring your screwdriver.'

She smiled.

'See you after homeroom?' I asked.

'Indeed.'

Our school was one of those classy places built in the seventies: brick buildings with tiny windows and ceiling fans instead of air conditioning. The rooms smelt of pee and mildew, and were carpeted in industrial polyester carpet the colour of baby vomit. What the place lacked in style it made up for in location: the grounds were carved into the top of a mountain ridge and overlooked a valley of bush. Instead of the standard tree-less bitumen grounds of most schools, we had acres of grass and trees. (Too many trees – the science block fried in a bushfire three years ago.) The room I was in for homeroom was right on the edge of the bush. In summer it was a sweatbox and the air was so shrill with cicadas Mr Effrez would swear at them and shut the windows. In winter it was quiet and we were lucky each period was only forty-five minutes because any longer sitting in one spot and you'd freeze your arse off.

Lokey was already inside when I got to homeroom. He was in the back row, his usual position. His feet were up on the desk, which meant Effrez was nowhere to be seen, yet.

'Hey,' he said.

I dropped my bag and took a seat next to him.

'Hey.' I tried to appear casual.

'What's up? Your grin is freakin' me out, man.'

'Nothing.'

'Oh, come on.' Lokey jabbed me in the arm. 'Is it a chick? Who? What have you done?'

‘A gentleman never tells,’ I said.

‘Serious?’

‘Serious.’

‘You are a total wanker,’ Lokey said and took his feet off the desk as Effrez walked in the room.

‘Ah, my faithful pupils,’ Effrez said.

‘Sir.’

‘What are you doing in here? Bell hasn’t gone yet.’

‘It’s raining, sir,’ Lokey replied.

‘That it is. You don’t appear to have defaced anything, so I’ll let it slide. How are you going with *Heart of Darkness*, Mr Findlay Heath?’ He put his briefcase on the desk and unwound his scarf from his neck. He actually managed to wear a scarf and look more like a poet than a wanker. He was a mixture of Professor Snape from Harry Potter and Badger from *The Wind in the Willows*. Other than taking our class for homeroom, he refused to teach anything other than senior English.

‘Good, sir,’ I replied. I’d read four pages.

‘Excellent. You know that the essay is due in a week. I’ll be interested to hear your thoughts.’

So would I.

The bell rang and students filed into the room. Effrez leaned on the front of his desk and watched everyone take their seats. He didn’t have to call for quiet.

‘And how are we all today?’

The tone was more menacing than conversational. Effrez folded his arms, eyes scanning the class as if looking for prey.

‘All looking very relaxed, aren’t we? Anyone got any idea what is happening out there?’ He gestured toward the windows. ‘You know, out in the *world*? Out there beyond Facebook and your smart phone and whatever reality television show they happen to be spoon-feeding you these days?’

No one made a sound. It was safest not to when Effrez was having one of his ‘episodes’. Morning announcements began to crackle through the intercom but he turned the volume down. Then he smiled and sat in his chair as if he was about to tell us a nursery story.

‘Did you know, dear pupils, that there are two countries out there – neighbours – who don’t like each other very much? They both like to puff out their chests and show how big and tough they are. Well, one of them has some special missiles, not very nice ones, and they are going to test them. It would be nice to think that our government, good honest folk that they are, would put their hand up and say that Australia will impose sanctions unless the tests are abandoned. But they won’t. Don’t want to jeopardise all those big trade dollars, do they? Have any of you heard about this?’

Half the class raised their hands tentatively.

'Well, that's better than none. Assuming you're being honest. I suggest the rest of you pull your heads out of your arses.' Mr Effrez walked to the door and shut it. 'And who is going to the march tomorrow? Come on.'

Nobody moved.

'WHO IS GOING TO THE PROTEST?'

The class shuddered.

'Have I taught you nothing? If you have anything vaguely resembling a spine, you will go. I want to be asked why none of my pupils were in class. If I hear any of you are at school tomorrow, I will be bitterly disappointed.'

He strolled back to the window, hands in his coat pockets.

'Not everyone's as relaxed as you lot about all this. There's a group of activists building a self-sustaining settlement – complete with underground water-table access – outside the city. They believe that climate change is going to cripple our resources, either global warming, or more terrifying, nuclear winter if there is a full-scale nuclear war, which there may well be. Any of you heard about these people?'

Lokey raised his hand.

'Mr Loke? Wonders will never cease.'

'Saw it on *Today Tonight*, sir. My dad said they're a bunch of commie hippies.'

'Did he now? Do you even know what a commie is, Alexander?'

Lokey grinned. 'Someone who drives a Kombi van, sir?'

'Ahhh, very amusing. I'd rather be with a bunch of commie hippies than rely on our government if it were a matter of life or death.'

The bell sounded.

'So,' said Mr Effrez. 'To conclude, tomorrow, come to the march. Don't just bugger off to Westfield.'

I spotted Lucy in the corridor. She smiled and walked over.

'What did your class do?' she asked. 'I could hear Effrez through the wall.'

'He wants us to wag tomorrow,' Lokey said.

'No kidding?' She looked at me. 'I'm not the only one, then.'

'He's a freakin' nut job,' Lokey said. 'Talking about some hippies starting a freakin' commune.'

Lucy looked puzzled.

'It's not important. You coming to bio?'

'Unless it's been cancelled. We live in hope.'

At recess Lokey and I went to our usual spot behind the science

block with some other guys. Our group had semi-merged with Lucy's, but I didn't sit with her, trying again to play it cool. I saw her briefly in the corridor after third period and she winked at me, which I definitely didn't handle as coolly as I would have liked. I went to English, where I bluffed my way through a conversation about *Heart of Darkness* before spending the rest of the period reading an article on climate change that Effrez had photocopied out of *The Monthly* magazine. (He was introducing us to investigative journalism, something I'm pretty sure wasn't part of the syllabus.) After English was modern history where I sat next to Lucy and didn't learn a thing I was so bloody distracted.

By lunch the rain had cleared and I kicked a ball with a few guys until we were booted off the basketball court. We all went down the bottom of the oval and dumped our bags at the edge of the bush. Then we noticed Mr Effrez leaning against a tree further in the scrub, he was looking out over the valley and smoking a cigar. As we sat down he slowly turned around.

'Gentlemen,' he said gravely.

'Sir.'

Effrez flicked his scarf over his shoulder and strolled over.

'I'm fairly certain this area is considered out of bounds,' he said.

'Would you be more comfortable if we were smoking cigars, sir?'

'Slightly. I should give you each a detention.'

'Except you're down here smoking a cigar, sir,' Lokey said.

'Except I know that another detention for you, Mr Loke, and you'll be up for a suspension. Don't see why you should get a holiday.'

'Looking out for us, sir?'

'Always. You did an excellent job in class today, Mr Heath, bluffed your way through an entire conversation.'

I wasn't sure whether to thank him or apologise.

'Interesting how as soon as a book becomes mandatory reading no one wants to read it. You do read though, don't you, Fin?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What was the last thing you read?'

'*The Road*, sir. Cormac—'

'McCarthy. Excellent. Read *Heart of Darkness*, Mr Heath. Read it in light of McCarthy's work. McCarthy, like most of us, owes a great deal to Joseph Conrad.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Will you gentleman all be attending the protest march tomorrow?'

Lokey pushed the toe of his sneaker through the dirt.

'Don't see the point, sir. It's got nothing to do with us. If they want to blow each other up that's their business.'

The bell rang. Mr Effrez stubbed the end of his cigar against a tree trunk. He took a small metal box from his pocket and placed the cigar end inside it. He turned and started walking back toward the school. Then he stopped and looked at Lokey over his shoulder.

'I dare say it'll be your business, Mr Loke. You can trust me on that.'

Two

The guy with the gun is screaming now. He's saying something about Max again. He grabs a handful of my hair and wrenches my head back. His mouth is next to my ear, his breath tobacco-drenched and foul. My eyes try to focus in the dark, but all I can make out is the pattern of the brick wall in front of my face.

I found Lucy in the corridor after last period. She was standing with two of her friends. They looked me up and down in that way girls do; I must have passed their examination because they relinquished her.

'Do you still want to go to the library? Or do you just wanna go home?' I tried to sound like I was completely neutral.

She grinned. 'You really think I'm going to give up that easy? There's no way you're beating me on this essay, Findlay. Your arse is mine.'

I swallowed.

The school library was empty except for a few other seniors. The librarian gave Lucy and me a warning look, as if she suspected us of using the reference section for purposes other than research (I wish). We actually got more work done than I was expecting. Lucy was a good influence. After we were done photocopying, Lucy started to pack away her things and I thought that maybe it was going to be nothing more than a study session. Maybe I had imagined this thing between her and me and she really was way out of my league. Maybe I was just a curiosity to her. Maybe she was just toying with me; practising for someone more popular. We'd been friends ever since that first modern history lesson. Maybe what I saw as flirting she saw as a way to ease her boredom. She laughed at my jokes. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

'So, Findlay, tell me. What do you like to draw, I mean, besides people you are stalking, of course.'

'Of course. Um, people mostly. At the moment it's usually people with, like random things.'

'Random things?'

'Objects that they are kind of linked to, in my head, in an abstract way. But, um, I like to play with the scale, so I did a drawing of my mum sitting next to an alarm clock, but the alarm clock was bigger than her. It sounds really dumb when I say it like that. But I think if you met her you'd understand. I did another one of her with a massive empty birdcage. With one of those mirrors that people put inside them, for birds to look at themselves or whatever. I did that one after

she left. So, you know, paging Dr Freud.'

'Your mum left?'

'Yeah. Two years ago. My brother and I got home and there was all this stuff missing from the house. I thought we'd been robbed, but I couldn't work out why a burglar would take our kitchen clock. Then I found this letter on the table in the hallway. My dad was supposed to be home earlier that day. He was supposed to find it, not us. But he didn't come home, so I was the one who found it and I… read it. I shouldn't have. I really wish I hadn't, but…'

'Shit, Fin.'

'Yeah. I mean we still see her a lot and stuff, but she made it pretty clear she didn't want to be at home with us any more.'

Lucy looked at me intently, like she expected me to continue.

'She was really young when she had us so maybe that has something to do with it… She's really smart, she's done a lot of study into human behaviour, had some stuff published. She was offered some amazing jobs when we were younger. What I mean is, I think she missed out on a lot, having us so young. And Dad can be a total prick. He stuffed up a fair bit…' I could feel my throat tightening. I hadn't talked much about this stuff, wasn't the kind of thing you could really debrief with Lokey.

'But, to leave? That's horrible.'

'Yeah. It's pretty bad.'

'I understand about drawing her. I don't draw, but I play the piano a bit. Write songs.'

I had seen her play. It should be illegal to look that sexy in a school hall.

'I think it's how I process things. My sister was quite sick a few years ago. Eating disorder; she nearly died. I wrote a lot of music around then. For me, it's like I'm not thinking about the thing I'm writing about, not directly anyway. But something clicks over in my head and music comes out and I don't even know where it comes from. Does that make sense?'

'Totally. If you asked me to talk about how I feel about stuff, I can't. But I can draw it.'

As she looked at me I could feel her gaze reaching right inside of me. Like she could see into the tunnels of my mind that no one had ever seen before. She didn't speak. I inhaled slowly, trying to get the balls to do what I wanted to do. I leaned toward her, testing a little to see if she would shift away. She didn't.

My phone rang, shrill in the quiet of the library. I grabbed it. Mum. I blocked the call. It rang again.

'Jealous girlfriend?' asked Lucy.

'Yeah. Sorry, I better get this.'

‘It’s your mum, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah.’

She laughed. I gave her the finger and answered the phone.

‘Fin?’ Mum was panicked. I could tell from the pitch of her voice. It wasn’t an unfamiliar sound.

‘Yeah, Mum. Who else would it be?’ I rolled my eyes at Lucy.

‘Where are you?’

‘School. The library.’

‘Have you seen the news?’

‘What? No. What’s wrong?’

‘God, Fin. Get home. Where’s Max?’

‘I don’t know. What’s wrong, Mum? Would you just chill for a minute?’

‘Fin, go to the supermarket, get as much non- perishable food as you can carry. And water. Get water—’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The missiles, Fin. Something’s gone wrong, very wrong. We don’t know much, but it looks as though regions in the north of Asia have been hit as well as the Gobi Desert. Word is it’s a nuclear test gone wrong, but it might have been deliberate. We don’t know—’

She dropped out.

‘Mum?’

‘Fin? Can you hear me?’

The line crackled. ‘Just,’ I answered.

‘I’ve tried to get on to your dad but I can’t. I can’t get Max either. I want you both at home as soon as possible, but you need to get food and water, Fin, understand?’

Lucy was making faces at me, trying to make me laugh.

‘Yeah, Mum. It’s cool, it’ll be fine.’

‘Call me when you get home, promise.’

‘Yes, Mum.’

I hung up. Lucy frowned.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I think we should go.’

‘Sure, you know we could grab a coffee—’

‘No—’

The wail of a siren sounded over the loudspeakers: the evacuation alarm. It was usually reserved for bushfires. An announcement followed, it told anyone who was still on the school premises to go to the quadrangle immediately.

‘What’s happened?’ Lucy asked.

I told her what my mum had told me.

‘We should go to the quad,’ Lucy said.

‘No, I reckon we should get out of here. Go into town, get food.

Get a bus from there.'

We shoved our stuff into our bags and left the library, ducking down a side path that led behind the science blocks. Soon we were on the driveway and then out onto the main road.

By the time we got into town the sky had changed. It was like the sun was being choked with thick orange dust. The sky glowed, throbbing with colour, but it was like it had swallowed up all the sunlight. Everything beneath the sky – the streets and buildings – was monotone. People were standing out on the street looking up, like they expected to see Godzilla crash through the streetscape.

'Oh my God,' Lucy whispered.

We looked up, absorbed by it. It was beautiful – and wrong.

Lucy tried to call her mum but couldn't get through. She tried again and again. I could see her bottom lip starting to tremble. She put her phone away and took my hand.

We went to the big supermarket near the highway. The aisles were already half empty. Mute, we both grabbed trolleys and filled them with whatever was left. Baked beans in barbecue sauce, canned sausages, creamed corn, canned baby carrots, as much bottled water as we could carry home.

We carried the shopping bags up to the bus stop.

'It'll be okay,' I said, even though I had absolutely nothing to base that on.

I couldn't think of anything else to say. Lucy was distracted and she twisted a strand of hair around and around her pinkie. When the bus came we got on and I sat next to her. I wanted the trip to be over because I felt awkward, like I was failing. But at the same time I didn't want the afternoon to end. The sky was weighed down with colour and light and under any other circumstances it would have been romantic. We didn't say anything the whole way. The bus reached our stop and we both got off.

'Can I help you carry some of your stuff?'

'No, it's okay, it's fine.'

'Really, it's no problem.' I held out my hand. She gave me one of her grocery bags to carry. We walked across the road and down the street a bit to Lucy's house. I followed her up to the porch and waited while she unlocked the door. I handed her the grocery bag.

'Thank you,' she said.

'I'll call you, okay?'

'Bye, Fin.' She leaned over and kissed my cheek. I watched her go inside and disappear from my life.

Three

I dropped my keys twice trying to open my front door. When I got inside I dumped the shopping bags and called my brother's name. There were no signs of life. I went through to the living room and there he was, game console in his hands, eyes on the TV screen.

'Max, why didn't you answer the phone? Mum's been trying to call you… Max?'

His eyes didn't leave the screen. I took the controller from his hands.

'What are you doing? Fin! You dickhead! I'd almost finished level seven!'

'Haven't you seen outside?'

'What?' He went to the window. His eyes widened. 'Whoa. Cool!'

'Not cool, Max. Definitely not cool.'

A thin woman with too much make-up told us that the nuclear missiles had been launched around four pm, Australian time. The woman looked out at us from the television screen and told us that it was unclear what had gone wrong. She crossed to a concerned-looking man who said that firestorms from the blasts would have incinerated cities and wilderness areas. According to scientific modelling it would be a matter of days before clouds of dust and ash choked the atmosphere and, as a result, the temperature would begin to drop. He made cheery predictions about infrastructure collapse, crop shortages and global famine.

I called Mum again. She made me list every food item I had bought from the supermarket. At the same time I was talking to her, Kara, my step-mum, arrived home carrying grocery bags, still in her yoga outfit.

'Is that your mum?' she asked. 'Tell her I got water, so she can stop calling me.'

'Did you hear that?' I asked Mum.

'Yes. I also want you to get every bottle and container you can find and fill them with tap water. Do it now, straightaway.'

'Okay.'

'Fin, they want me to go to Canberra. I don't know if I will. I'm not too sure what's going on yet, but I want you to stay where you are, okay? If things change I will find a way to get to you. Do you understand?'

'Yeah. Mum, do you think people could be overreacting?'

'Fin, it's my job not to overreact.'

We did as she said and filled every available container with

water, lining them all up in the garage. After that, we all stayed in front of the television, watching the never-ending news bulletin. The picture regularly dissolved into a stutter of pixels.

There were no pictures from the disaster zone. We're used to having pictures of everything – from security footage of suicide bombers to Nicole Kidman's kids. There were no pictures and no live crosses to reporters in the disaster zone. There was nothing in the disaster zone. All that was left to broadcast was endless speculation about the immediate future of the planet, the weather, food – and the estimated death toll. Entire nations had been vapourised. What a way to go. At least it would be quick, that's what people were saying, as if that was a consolation.

The news coverage went round in circles and the prime minister called for calm. There was footage of a huge television screen erected in Martin Place to show the news to city workers. News showing the news.

I sent a text to Lucy. *R u ok?* I didn't know what else to say.

Dad got home just before dinner. He came through the living room and nodded at us, then went into the kitchen and talked to Kara quietly. I could hear Kara's voice getting all high-pitched and emotional, then Dad came out of the kitchen, clapped his hands together and announced dinner was ready. Kara put the bowls on the table without making eye contact with anybody. It was some sort of lentil and chickpea curry. Hell, if I had to cook dinner for my step-kids, I'd probably make sure it was something just as inedible.

'Is it going to snow?' Max asked. 'Radioactive snow?'

'No, it's not going to snow radioactive snow,' Dad said, shaking enough salt on his food to preserve it.

'How do you know?' Max asked.

'Yeah, Greg, how do you know?' Kara said.

Dad glared at her discreetly, but not quite discreetly enough for me not to notice. He shovelled food into his mouth. 'I don't know. But I bet you it'll all be over in a couple of weeks.'

'What if it's not?' Kara said. 'They said on the news it could affect the climate for years.'

'I don't know. I haven't seen the news. I've been at work.'

'Oh, is that a hint, Greg?' Kara asked. 'I told you I've got some work on next week.'

'That wasn't a hint. I was simply saying that I've been at work all day and I haven't had the luxury of watching the news.'

'Can't you look at it online, Dad?' Max asked. He looked genuinely puzzled.

Dad sighed. My phone beeped. Lucy? I got up to check. Dad

pointed at my seat.

'Sit,' he said. 'Have dinner as a family and then look at your bloody phone.'

'Kara's not family,' Max said.

'She is your family,' Dad said.

'No, she's not.'

Dad slammed his fist on the table. 'She's married to me and that makes her family, Max. Right? Anyone else got any comments?'

'I didn't marry her,' Max said and gulped his juice. Kara put her fork down and stood up.

'I'm going to my mum's,' she said calmly.

'Max, go to your room. Kara, sit down.'

'No thank you, Greg,' Kara said.

'No thank you, Greg,' Max said.

'Max Heath, if you are not in your room in three seconds, God help me. Kara, can you please sit down?' He spoke in the same tone to both of them. I ate my curry. It wasn't that bad. Kara picked up her keys and went out the front door. Dad put his head in his hands.

'Bye, Kara,' Max said in a singsong voice. With one swoop of his arm, Dad knocked everything that was in front of him off the table and onto the floor. He stood up and pointed at Max, his finger quivering.

'You… You… ungrateful little…'

He followed Kara out the front door.

'Good one, Max,' I said. 'Way to go.'

'Shut up. Just because you're in love with Kara.'

'What are you doing, man? What are you doing?' I started to pick the things up off the floor: cutlery, bowls, salt and pepper shakers. It was a mess. 'Can you give me a hand instead of standing there like an idiot?'

Dad came back inside, slamming the door shut behind him. He picked his keys up off the bench.

'I'm following Kara,' he said. 'I'll be back soon and I'll speak to you then, Max.'

And then he was gone.

The message on my mobile was from Lokey. I tried to go online to chat with him about what was going on but the internet was all jammed up and the connection kept failing. I left it for an hour then tried again. It still wasn't working. I called the internet company but their line seemed to be down. Then it occurred to me that maybe they operated their call centres from places that didn't exist any more.

Dad didn't come home. I tried to call him but his phone must have been off or out of range. Eventually I told Max to go to bed and I

did the same.

It happened quickly. Quicker than they were expecting. Quicker than they told us it would happen. Or maybe Lucy was right and the government knew how bad it would be and they just didn't tell us. Or maybe we knew all along and we were like kids covering our eyes for the scary bit of the movie.

It was the cold that woke me the next morning, biting up my legs and over my arms. My room was almost completely dark except for a hint of light seeping through my curtains. There were no bird sounds. Still in the drudge of sleep I figured it must have been really early. I hunkered down under the covers and was sliding back toward sleep when I felt a prodding on my arm. I opened my eyes expecting to see Dad, but it was Max, standing there with a blanket around his shoulders.

'Are we going to school today?' he asked.

'Jeez man, I don't know. It's early, go back to bed.'

'It's not early. It's nearly eight-thirty.'

'Yeah, funny, Max. Go back to bed.'

'Fin, I'm telling you. It's nearly eight-thirty.'

I sat up. 'Is it raining?'

'No. It's snowing. Radioactive snow. Loads of it. It's glowing.'

'Ha, ha. Is Dad home?'

'No. It's not glowing, but it is snowing. Serious.'

I still half thought he was taking the piss, but it was freakin' freezing and he was standing there wrapped in a blanket. Max went over to the window and pulled the curtain back. The sky was a flat brownish grey. I got up and went to the window.

Mum and Dad took me on a trip to the snow when I was three, a couple of years before Max was born. I remember heaps about that trip because it was the only time I'd seen snow. I remember driving to the snowfields in the milky early-morning light and Mum pointing to the white-capped mountains in the distance. I had a blue plastic toboggan with a piece of rope to hold on to and steer with. It was that waxy, plasticky rope, threaded through two holes, tied in a knot and the ends melted in a white glob. I took my gloves off to rub my thumb over the smooth glob of plastic. It looked like used chewing gum. Mum made me put my gloves back on again. I remember hurtling down a slope and flying over a mound of snow and sliding across the icy bitumen of the car park. I remember the white, the searing, aching white.

The snow outside my window wasn't white. It was dirty grey

slurry and it lay in patches over our front lawn and formed a little peak on the top of our letterbox.

'Told you. I'm going out.' Max raced out of my room and down the hall. I stood at the window mesmerised by the scene. Then I remembered something.

'Max!' I shouted after him. I bolted down the hall. 'Max, wait!'

I got to the door just before he opened it. 'Don't,' I said.

'Why not?'

'It might be radioactive.'

'No way.'

'I'm serious. You might get sick. We should stay inside.'

He actually looked thrilled at the fact the snow could be poisonous. I went into the living room and turned on the television. Nothing. I flicked a light switch. Nothing. Back in my room I turned on my laptop, it had a full battery. I tried to connect to the internet to find out what was going on, but it wouldn't work. I found my mobile among the mess on my desk. I dialled Dad's number and was told again that it was switched off or out of range. Mum's number gave me the same response.

Max reappeared in my doorway. 'The TV's not working,' he complained.

'I know. There's no electricity.'

'Why?'

'I don't know why. Maybe because of the drop in temperature.'

I got dressed and then I pulled some tracksuit pants on over my jeans and put on an old hoodie. A pretty poor substitution for a radiation suit. I went into Dad's room and opened his top drawer, where he usually kept a bit of cash. I took out a ten-dollar note and told Max I was going to see if I could get a paper. I took a deep breath and went outside.

The cold hit my cheeks with a wet slap. I shoved my hands in my pockets. Most cars were still in their driveways, it didn't seem that many people had gone to work. Ellen, who lived across the road, was standing out on her front path watching her two little kids pelt each other with bits of sludge-grey snow. She saw me and waved.

'Hi,' she called. 'Isn't this wild?'

I crossed the road and met her on the nature strip in front of her place. I didn't know her very well, but she and her husband were friendly, always said hello. Her cheeks were rosy with the cold and her eyes were bright.

'Have you ever seen anything like this?' she asked.

'No. Can't say I have. Do you have any electricity? Our power's out.'

She shook her head. 'When Mick got up this morning he said it

was out. He didn't know what to do, whether to go to work. Went in the end, put chains on the ute. Can you believe that? Chains! Here!'

Mick was a builder – a short guy who played league and was roughly the shape of a rectangle. Their kids were about three and five. The youngest one, Zadie, was squealing while her brother, Zac, chased her around with a handful of slurry. They had made an attempt at a snowman, but really it was nothing more than a grey mound with a few twigs sticking out of it.

Ellen noticed me looking at it. 'We don't have any carrots,' she said. 'Isn't that what you're supposed to use for a nose?' She shrugged. 'I don't know. I've never made a snowman before. This is the first time they've seen snow. It's a shame it's so dirty. From the bombs, yeah?'

'Yeah. I guess… Hey, I don't know if it's safe for them to play in it.'

'Really?' Her eyes widened. 'I didn't know.'

'Yeah, I mean I don't know for sure, but…'

'Should probably get them inside then.'

'Do you have lots of food?'

She frowned.

'It's… there might be food shortages. You should make sure you have a lot of canned food.'

'Oh. Um, I have a bit.' She shrugged.

'Look, I'm going up the road to the shop, do you want me to grab you some?'

'Really? That's nice of you. I don't know what you should get, soup maybe. They won't eat tuna. I'll just go and get you some cash.' She went inside. The kids looked up at me.

'Snow!' said Zadie. She had pink mittens on. Her brother didn't have any gloves on. He had a trail of dried snot over his cheeks like a slug had wandered over his face.

'We made a snowman!' he said and pointed. I had no idea what to say to little kids, so I just nodded and said, 'Cool'. He seemed pretty happy with that response. He picked up some more snow and ran off down the side of the house. Ellen came back outside and gave me a twenty-dollar note.

'Do you reckon that'll be enough? That should be enough.'

'Sure, I'll just get whatever I can with that.'

'Thanks,' she said. 'Say bye-bye to Fin, Zadie,' she instructed. Zadie waved a mitten at me and smiled.

I have known Mr Starvos, the guy who owns the little supermarket, nearly my whole life. Or maybe it is my whole life. He's been there as long as I can remember. When I was small, Dad used to take me up the hill to the supermarket on a Sunday afternoon before

the footy started on television. He would hoist me up onto his back when my legs got tired. He'd buy me some Wizz Fizz or a bag of mixed lollies. The freckles were my favourite. I used to give the banana lollies to Dad. Them and the lolly teeth – they used to freak me out.

Starvos was open even on Christmas Day, so I figured he wouldn't let something like a power shortage stop him. Sure enough, the front door was open and he was sitting behind the front counter, the store dimly lit with a few mozzie candles. Starvos was in a T-shirt despite the cold. I suppose that was his winter uniform, in summer he always wore a white singlet. He was rolling a cigarette, which he then stuck behind his ear.

'Mr Findlay!'

'Mr Starvos.'

'What you need today?'

'Newspaper. Oh and some canned stuff for Ellen. Can you believe the snow?'

'It is crazy.' He shook his head and clicked his tongue. 'No paper I'm afraid. The truck not come. There is not a lot of canned food either; everyone has been buying up.'

He was right. There wasn't a lot left. The general population did seem to have an aversion to baked beans in barbecue sauce, though. I filled a basket with a selection of soups and canned vegetables. Starvos wrote the prices in a notebook.

'Eighteen-dollars-twenty, my friend.'

I gave him the money. He bagged up the cans and handed them to me.

I walked back down the hill as I had done so many times, but now the scene was completely alien. I couldn't quite comprehend the weight of it. When we were little kids we used to ask Dad if it would ever snow here. His answer was a definite no. But on really cold mornings I would still run to the window, half-believing that I would find a scene like in all those American Christmas movies. Miracle on Bellbird Crescent. And here it was. Only it was like someone had leaked brown ink into the snow dome. It was no winter wonderland.

When I got to Ellen's, the kids' faces were pressed up against the window and they breathed blooms of fog against the glass. They watched me walk up the front path. I knocked on the door and Ellen answered.

'Thank you so much,' she said, taking the bags from me. 'Hopefully it'll tide us over. This can't last that long. They'd have stuff in place, don't you think? So we don't run out of food?'

'I don't know. I guess if there's no electricity and all the roads are snowed under…'

‘Yeah. I guess it’s best to be stocked up.’

‘I’ll see you later, anyway.’

‘Okay. And thanks again.’

She shut the door and I turned to walk down the path. Zac was gone from the window, but Zadie was there, watching me. I waved and she waved back, pressing her nose against the glass.

Lokey’s Jaffa-red Datsun was parked at the top of our driveway. I navigated my way carefully down the slope. Outside our front door I took off my shoes, my hoodie and the tracksuit pants I was wearing over my jeans. I left them on the porch and went inside. Lokey was in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal. His shoes had left puddles across the tiles.

‘Dude!’ he said. ‘Snow! Can you believe it? It’s fully awesome.’

‘I can’t believe you drove here, there’s ice on the road.’

‘It was sweet. Bit slidey. I brought my board down.’

‘What? Your snowboard? The snow’s patchy as.’

‘Yeah, but I reckon I could get a sick run down your front lawn.’

Max walked in holding an esky lid. ‘Will this do?’ he asked Lokey.

‘Maxi*mum*. That’s awesome, dude.’

‘Hey Lokey, can you put your shoes outside?’ I got a roll of paper towel and then reconsidered and put on some washing-up gloves.

‘Who the hell are you, the cleaning lady?’ Lokey took his shoes off and dumped them on the front porch.

‘Fin thinks the snow is poisonous, radioactive,’ said Max.

‘Serious?’ laughed Lokey. ‘How do you know?’

I blotted up the puddles with the towel and put it in a garbage bag, tying the end. I was pretty sure that wasn’t the recommended procedure for nuclear waste management.

‘We *don’t* know. That’s the point.’

‘But wouldn’t they tell us?’

‘How? There’s no electricity.’

Lokey let out a low whistle and shook his head. ‘Poison or no poison, I’m going to ride your lawn, man.’

‘I’m coming!’ said Max, holding up the esky lid. ‘Toboggan.’

In my mind I heard my mother shrieking disapproval.

‘No you’re not,’ I said.

‘I am!’

‘No, Max.’

Max threw the esky lid on the floor and stormed to his room, slamming the door theatrically. Lokey was pissing himself with laughter.

‘You are hilarious,’ he said. ‘As if it’s poisonous.’

‘I saw an anti-terrorism website once. It went through the dangers of radiation.’

‘Dude, who the hell looks at anti-terrorism websites? Anyway, someone would have told us. It was on the other side of the world.’

‘I’m telling you. I have to look after Max, otherwise I wouldn’t care.’

‘Hey, where’s Kara?’

‘You’re obsessed.’

‘Admit it, Fin, she’s totally hot.’

‘You’re mentally disturbed.’

‘Where is she?’

‘I don’t know. She and Dad didn’t come home last night. Maybe they stayed at Kara’s mum’s. Maybe there’s ice on the road. I don’t know.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yeah.’ We both stood there in the space left for some sort of meaningful exchange. We didn’t fill it.

‘Heard you had a little study date with Lucy Tenningworth yesterday.’

‘Yeah. I dunno if I’d call it a date… Was kind of interrupted by the whole nuclear disaster thing.’

‘She is way out of your league, man.’

‘Thanks for your vote of confidence.’

He grinned. ‘I mean, are you sure she’s not using you to get to me? I am pretty popular these days.’

‘Again, your belief in me is amazing.’

‘Well, dude, I’m going to go ride your lawn. Watch from the window, you don’t wanna get poisoned.’

I watched Lokey do about five runs down our steep front lawn, each time bailing at the last moment before he hit our house. Then he threw his board in the back of the car and gave me a wave, off to find bigger slopes. The car fish-tailed as he took off up the hill.

I bummed around for a bit, had four slices of bread with jam for breakfast, did some drawing and tried to ignore the worry that was sitting in my gut. Max didn’t come out of his room till after lunch. He pretended it was because he was really pissed off but I think he probably just fell asleep. We meandered through the afternoon, waiting, but not sure what for. It’s amazing how slowly time goes when you have no electricity. Several times I reached for the TV controller, forgetting we had no power. Kara had given Dad a plasma for his birthday. (She said she had *bought* him a plasma as if she used her own money.) It’s funny how without something as simple as electricity it was completely useless – just a gaping, blank stare of black. Without electricity our house was a box of useless bits of moulded plastic and wiring. I was tempted to listen to my iPod, but figured the power could be down for ages. I wanted to save the

batteries.

I thought about Lucy.

By five it was dark and any heat in the house had leached out. I put on an extra jumper and two pairs of socks, found an old Dolphin torch in the garage and set it up on the dining table as a lamp. It turned out Kara's scented candles were useful after all. I lit a few in the kitchen and lounge room and pretty soon the place smelt sickly sweet with vanilla. Max and I played cards and listened for the sound of a car in the driveway.

Around six-thirty I got us some dinner, leftovers that were in the fridge: chickpea curry, cold sausages, slices of cheese. At least the cold would stop it from going off.

'This sucks,' said Max as he picked up a sausage, dunked it in tomato sauce and bit the end.

'I know.'

'Where's Dad, Fin?' There was a waver in his voice.

I swallowed. 'They're probably staying at Kara's mum's.'

'But you don't know, do you?'

'No, Max. I don't know.'

'What if he's dead?'

'He's not dead, Max. Why would he be dead?'

'Radiation poisoning.'

'Too soon, takes a while for radiation to kill a person.'

Max's eyes widened.

'I'm kidding, Max. He won't have radiation poisoning.'

'But you said…'

'Look, I know, but… Max, look at me.'

He turned his face to me. He has one of those faces that never really grows up. Big rosy cheeks and eyebrows that tilt up slightly in the centre, giving him an expression of permanent bemusement. At twelve he looked pretty much the same as he did when he was three and I reckon he won't have changed much by the time he's thirty.

'Max,' I said. 'I need you to stay with me, man. Whatever happens. We can do it but we have to do it together.'

'Do what?' His lip quivered.

'See this out. Can you do that for me, Maximum? Trust me. Okay?'

He nodded soberly. The torch threw a stark pool of white light onto the wall, like a spotlight. Max and I ate the rest of our dinner in silence.

Four

When morning came the sky was like a shadow. It had snowed again, more this time, the same colour as the sky. There were cars missing from driveways, cars that hadn't returned from the night before. That made me feel a bit better, it meant the roads must have been closed. Dad wasn't the only one who hadn't come home. I imagined him in a community hall somewhere drinking weak tea and eating Milk Arrowroot biscuits.

Max was quiet and didn't ask about going outside. We spent most of the day playing cards or Trivial Pursuit. I told him to pretend we were camping. We had tomato and cheese sandwiches for lunch. We even ate Kara's tahini and hummus. When evening came around again I lit some candles and put the torch on. We ate more sandwiches for dinner. (I wanted to use the perishable food first.) After dinner Max read comics and I worked on my drawings. I drew Starvos at the store, counting the money in the till with a cigarette behind his ear.

Days passed. Still, long days. Time bled into itself. Snow started falling during the day as well as at night. I didn't see any cars drive past. We didn't have any dry firewood because we'd hardly used the fire that winter, it had been too mild. Now the cold settled into the house, filling it out. We started to wear more layers of clothing and the cold was made worse because there was nothing much to do, nothing to keep us warm. The boredom and waiting hung over us and made us snap at each other. Most of the time we were quiet, though. There was nothing to say. We ate to punctuate the time. The living-room window with its view of the street became our television. Occasionally a neighbour would walk past. I saw Mr and Mrs White from two doors up walking their labradors.

My mind whirred with useless imagined scenarios: Dad decomposing on the side of the highway having crashed his car; Lokey slowly dying of radiation poisoning; Lucy starving to death because I didn't encourage her to buy more food; My mother… who knew what had happened to her. I couldn't even form a picture of her to worry about. How were we supposed to know if 'things changed' and she was coming for us? How long were we supposed to wait? And how was she planning on getting here with the roads iced over? Was she going to borrow an army truck? Fly a chopper? The only way I could quieten the endless worry was to draw. I drew Dad in the car. I drew my mother in a chopper. I drew Lucy.

One afternoon, about four days in, Mrs White came to our front

door. It was pathetically exciting to have a visitor. Max was asleep on the couch and I half wanted to wake him up so he wouldn't miss out. When I opened the door Mrs White's dogs whined and strained on their leashes, pawing my legs and nosing my feet.

'Oh boys! Stop it! Heel!' she said in a voice that was less than authoritative. They panted and looked up at me with big lolling grins.

'Hello Fin. Is your dad here?' Mrs White asked, craning to look past me into the house. She had a kind of plump homeliness about her that made me think of freshly baked Anzac biscuits. You could practically smell the golden syrup.

'No. He's not.'

'No?! Where is he?'

'Um, I don't really know. I haven't seen him since Wednesday.' I almost choked up when I said that.

'Wednesday! My goodness! You should have come around, Fin. I had no idea. I thought I saw him come home from work on Wednesday night?'

'Yeah, he and, um, Kara went out again that night. They didn't come back, probably because of the roads. I hoped they would be back by now but I guess it's just got colder – more icy.'

'Oh my goodness, Fin. You poor love. You know he's probably perfectly safe, they've got no way of clearing the roads, I suppose. It's not like we're used to dealing with snow down here!' She laughed but her eyes darted around nervously. 'I was just calling in to see if you'd had any luck with the internet, if you'd managed to get any news. It's like we've fallen into a black hole.' She laughed again and shook her head. One of the dogs yawned and put its head on her foot. 'It's just awful, isn't it? But I suppose they'll sort it out soon enough, get the electricity back up. I just want to know how long this cold's going to stick around. You know we've got our daughter's wedding next month, we thought it'd be a lovely spring wedding.' She motioned out to the street. 'But instead we've got the next ice age!'

'Yeah, sorry, no luck with the net.'

'Oh dear. Have you got enough food, love? We're always well stocked up, you let me know if you need anything.'

I nodded. 'We've got a fair bit. Mum was really worried about shortages.'

'Okay. You know where we are. Try not to worry about your dad.'

I said goodbye to Mrs White and watched her dogs pull her up the driveway. I took off my socks. I put them out on the porch beside the tracksuit pants I had worn the other day and closed the door.

Our house started to show symptoms of neglect – the grotty kind that comes from having only male occupants under the age of twenty.

The kitchen had become a festering dump and precarious towers of dishes had grown over the bench tops. There might have been a time when you could joke about it being a toxic-waste hazard, but now comments like that didn't seem funny.

This is embarrassing and I really don't want to admit it, but neither of us had washed since the power went off. The thought of stripping off and washing in freezing and possibly radioactive water wasn't exactly enticing. But it wasn't until after I had been exposed to the fresh air when I was talking to Mrs White that I noticed the putrid, stale smell mulling in our house; one part body odour, two parts Rexona and one part vanilla-scented candles. I'm also ashamed to say that I didn't really notice the neglected state of the kitchen either until we ran out of clean plates. I couldn't remember the last time I had done washing-up. Before we got a dishwasher Max and I used to whine about having to do the washing-up and beg for a dishwasher. Mum would say that if we had a dishwasher we'd just whine about unpacking it and we were like 'No way!' But she was right, we did. Spoilt brats.

I cleared everything out of the sink – piling dishes on the floor when I ran out of bench space – and located the plug underneath a damp dishcloth that smelled like a rotting carcass. I opened one of the bottles of water and sloshed the bare minimum into the sink. It would be the dodgiest washing-up job of all time, but I didn't want to waste water that could be drunk. I woke Max to help wipe up, something which would normally cause a fair amount of pre-teen wrath, but this time didn't get much response. He silently trudged into the kitchen and began wiping the dishes. His fingers were bone white. Max doesn't have the kind of surface area to volume ratio that lends itself to heat retention. (Thank you biology class.) He never did. When we used to go to swimming lessons he would last a maximum of twenty minutes in the water before the instructors started to worry about public liability and let him get out.

He told me quietly that he was really cold.

'How many layers you got on?' I asked him.

'Five. Can hardly move.'

'I'm sorry, dude… It'll be over soon.'

'You don't know that.'

'No. I don't… but…'

He put down the tea towel and looked up at me. 'What's going to happen, Fin?'

'I don't know.'

'It's really cold. We have to light the fire.'

'We don't have any dry wood.'

'We have to find some. Have to try and dry it out. Fin, I'm really

cold.'

Where the hell was I going to find dry firewood? The furniture? After we'd done the washing-up I told Max to stay inside and find some newspaper. I went out the front door, put the tracksuit pants and hoodie on over my clothes and nudged my feet into my sneakers without touching them.

Dad kept the firewood stacked down the side of the house, against the wall, under the eaves. He used to keep it covered with a heavy tarp, but we hadn't been near the pile that winter. I had actually noticed the tarp lying on the ground once when I was putting the bins out and hadn't even bothered to put it back on. Surely someone, somewhere, was getting a laugh out of that.

The logs were piled to about waist height. Wedges of turpentine: the kind of thick stringy bark that flints away and gets wedged under your fingernails. I brushed the ice off them and lifted the logs from the pile one by one. I dropped them each by my feet where they landed with a dull thud. I thought maybe the ones right at the bottom of the pile would be the driest and I was right. With heavy lugs of the axe I split them into smaller wedges. Then I carried all the wood, dry and damp, up to the porch. I took off my shoes, hoodie and tracksuit pants and took each damp piece of wood in, stacking them against the kitchen wall. It took an age. When I was done I gathered up the smaller dry pieces and took them into the living room.

Max had found a few old newspapers in the garage. We scrunched the sheets into balls and stuffed them into the fireplace. I made a little tepee over the top with the thinnest strips of wood, my substitute for kindling. Max lit a match and threw it in. The newspaper caught fire and the room lit up with the sudden glow. Max and I watched the fire intently as it devoured the newspaper and flames shot and rumbled up the chimney. The tongues of flame lapped and curled around the shards of wood. I waited until the fire built before carefully placing a larger log inside. We didn't breathe, waiting to see if the wood would catch. Finally, just as the fire ran out of kindling and started to die away, the turpentine bark flared and a long thin flame quivered and reached up. Max and I exhaled. We rocked back onto our bums and hugged our knees, gazing at the flame.

The knock at the door startled us, like a teacher shouting from the front of the classroom when you didn't know you were doing anything wrong. Max and I looked at each other. The knock sounded again. Dad wouldn't knock. I got to my feet and went to the door, Max at my heels. I looked through the peephole: cops – one guy and one girl. Hot worry rushed thick and black through me. I swallowed and opened the door. The girl beamed at me.

'Hi there, I'm Constable Lund, this is Senior Constable Palmer.

We're just doing a whip around the neighbourhood to see how everyone's doing with the power out. Your mum or dad home?'

'No.'

'No?'

She was young with a kindergarten-teacher smile. The guy was putting on a serious 'I'm a cop, you're not' face. He was older than her but not by much.

'Our dad went out Wednesday night. Hasn't come back. I reckon he must be stuck because of the ice.'

Practice was making it easier to say, almost. Constable Lund nodded.

'There's been road closures. We've got a lot of people stuck on the freeway, they've been taken to shelter until we can open the roads again. I'm guessing you haven't had any phone contact with your dad? Most of the servers are down.'

'No.'

'Hmm.' She took out a notebook. 'What's your dad's name?'

'Greg Heath.'

The guy turned away and said something into his radio. I heard Dad's name.

'Why is the power down? When will it be on again?'

'Apparently it's because of the amount of carbon in the air. We really don't know when it will be back up. I'm sorry we can't give you better news. Are there any adults in the house?'

'Just me and my brother.'

'How old are you?'

'Eighteen,' I lied.

Constable Lund looked concerned. It suited her. Her partner was clearly trying to come over all *CSI*. It wasn't really working out for him. He finished talking on his radio and joined us again.

'I've put a call out to try and get some info on the whereabouts of your dad,' he said.

'Okay.'

'Is there a neighbour you can stay with, so you're not on your own?' Constable Lund asked.

'We're doing okay.'

'Do you have enough food for the moment?'

'Yeah, we're pretty stocked up.'

'Good. We're advising people to stay inside as much as possible.'

'Is the snow radioactive?'

She glanced at CSI. 'We really don't know yet. We don't have that equipment; the defence force is taking care of those investigations. Just try to stay inside, okay? Do you have bottled water?'

'Some.'

‘Good. Probably best to stick to drinking that for now. Maybe ration it and only drink what you need to. We’ll pop back in if we get any news on your dad. Try not to worry. Either way, we’ll be back in a few days to check up on how you’re doing.’

‘Okay, thanks.’

‘Take care.’ Constable Lund smiled and her partner gave me a curt nod. They trudged up the driveway and I closed the wooden door, resenting the warm air that had escaped.

Five

I continued to send failing text messages to Mum, Dad and Lokey. And Lucy. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened with us that afternoon if it hadn't been for the missiles. Having so much time on my hands only intensified my endless conjecture about the whole thing. So I decided to go see her. Don't get me wrong, my purpose wasn't to go to her house and jump her, I just wanted to see how she was doing. Maybe it was because she was the only person I cared about who I could go and physically find, Lokey lived too far away to walk.

I told Max I was going to see Mr and Mrs White – he would have been unbearable if he'd known I was going to see a girl.

It had been days since I'd been outside. I expected to step out, go up the drive and onto the street, breathe in the space, look out over the valley and see that my world was still here. I didn't expect to feel the claustrophobia of a world faded to grey. The pressing wall of the sky. Air that may or may not kill me. A deadened, suffocated still. The silence was oppressive. The only movement was my own breath. I made my way up the hill, looking at each house as I passed, each lawn smothered in grey, curtains drawn against the cold. The Ketterlys at number nine had their roller shutters down. Their house was one of those places that seemed designed to make all the other houses in the street look inadequate – roughly the size of a hotel with a fountain out the front. I mean, a fountain – what a wank. The guy was a surgeon and liked everyone to know about it. I bet he was wishing he had a heated driveway like Bill Gates. With the shutters down the house looked like a prison.

It seemed like the world was in hibernation. There were no birds calling, no breeze ruffling the trees, no cars passing down the street, no kids squealing, no lawnmowers. It wasn't like the pause before a breath. It was like the world had suffocated. I lifted my face to the cold unfamiliar face of the sky and walked up the hill.

I wondered where else it was snowing. Was it snowing in the city? Was it snowing in Perth? Adelaide? It was impossible to gauge the seriousness of the whole thing without any information from the outside world; like being blindfolded in deep water and not knowing where the edge was. Mum used to talk about going on holidays to the country when she was a kid. No television, no phone. It was like taking a break from the rest of the world for two weeks, she said. A war could start and you wouldn't even know about it until you got back. I used to struggle to imagine living without even a mobile. Surely the electricity was back up somewhere, it was just the

mountains left in the dark, wasn't it?

If things got bad Mum would come back for us. I clung to that while I trod water in the deep. Where the line was between this and bad, I didn't know.

Lucy's house was close to Starvos' supermarket. From the outside, it looked as closed up as every other. I went up the drive and knocked on the front door. I waited – nothing. I knocked again. Still nothing. I followed the driveway down the side of the house where I came to a large window, the curtains were drawn across but there was a gap. With my hands cupped against the glass I could see into the living room and through to the kitchen. There were no signs of life. I knocked on the window anyway, called through the glass. Nothing.

I tried to replace the hollowed-out feeling in my chest with the idea that she was somewhere else warm and safe.

The walk to Lucy's did yield one positive: Starvos' shop was still open. I didn't have any money on me though, so I went back home with the plan of collecting some, along with Max so that between us we could get as much food as we could carry. I made him put on four layers of clothing and then some old tracksuit pants and a jumper over the top. I took the last of the cash from Dad's room. We found some beanies, an army green one for me and a striped Swannies one for Max.

'Don't touch anything,' I told him. 'You have to remember that.'

He nodded enthusiastically, practically pawing at the door. When we went out Max cupped his hands over his mouth, breathing into them, his skinny frame visibly jarring against the cold. He laughed and looked around.

'It's freakin' freezing!'

'Yes.'

The soles of our shoes crunched in the snow as we trudged up the drive. Twice Max lost his footing and slid backward, he put his hand on the ground to steady himself, then he looked at me in alarm.

'Just don't go licking your hand,' I said.

Starvos was wearing a jumper. He sat on a stool behind the counter, doing the crossword in the back of a *Woman's Day*. The shop was lit with tea lights, the air sharp with the tang of citronella.

'They are the only candles I can find. At least the mosquitoes won't be biting me!' He laughed and shook his head. Barked a ragged smoker's cough. 'How are you boys? Your father, is he back?'

'Not yet.' I told him what the cops had said about people being stuck on the roads. I tried to sound positive, hyper aware of Max listening to my answer. 'Don't think it will be much longer.'

'I hope not. Anyway, what can I help you with?' Starvos motioned

to the empty shelves. The only things left in the shop were chocolate bars and chewing gum at the counter. ‘My stock is in the storeroom. You can’t trust people in times like this. And I tell you now, four cans only, that’s all I can give you,’ Starvos instructed. ‘I’m sorry, I do want to help you with your father away, but I can’t let one person buy the lot, you know? I have a responsibility as a shopkeeper. I am in a difficult position.’

I asked for two cans of spaghetti and two of creamed corn. ‘Can I get a packet of chips?’

‘Yes. One. You must understand I have to be fair to everybody.’

‘No worries.’ I gave Starvos some money. He handed me the change.

‘Two-eighty change? How much are the cans?’

‘The cans are four dollars each. There is no stock coming in, prices go up.’ He shrugged as if it were a phenomenon completely out of his control. ‘I do not have to open, you know, but I do. It is my responsibility. As a shopkeeper.’ He handed me the plastic bag.

‘Right. Sure.’

‘You have a good day.’

‘That’s robbery,’ I muttered to Max as we left the shop.

‘Nah, this is robbery.’ He pulled two Mars Bars and some Juicy Fruit out of his pocket.

I laughed. ‘Where’d you learn to do that?’

He shrugged.

I took a Mars Bar from him. ‘You make a habit of shoplifting?’

‘He was ripping us off.’

‘You little klepto.’

‘What?’

‘Kleptomaniac. Compulsive shoplifter.’

‘At least I’m sharing.’

‘At least.’ I ran forward, swivelled my feet so I slid in the snow. Max laughed and did the same. We chewed our Mars Bars and slid our way down the hill.

Six

We found a wire rack in the kitchen cupboard – the kind you use to cool cakes on. I propped it up on two bricks over the fire. Max watched me, gnawing his nails.

'There,' I said. 'Instant barbecue.'

We heated cans of mushroom and chicken soup. Max found a packet of marshmallows. We stabbed them with forks and toasted them over the fire until their skin charred and they burst thick pink goo.

'How come Mum and Dad never took us camping, you think?'

'You're too annoying without a TV.'

'Shut up. I'm fine with no TV.'

We chewed marshmallows, staring into the fire.

'It's good that the police can help us find Dad,' said Max.

'Um, yeah.'

'They'll come back as soon as they find him, won't they?'

'I guess.'

'Do you think it'll take much longer?'

'Max, I don't know.'

'Don't you think they'll be able to?' His tone changed, like he was pissed at me.

'I didn't say that.'

'But that's what you think.'

'I don't know what I think.'

'He's coming back.' There was a tremor in his voice.

'I hope so.'

In the dark I could see tears beginning to slide down his cheeks.

'He wouldn't just leave us here, Fin. He wouldn't. Even if he couldn't drive through the snow, he'd still come back to us.'

'I know he would. If he could. I'm not saying he wouldn't.'

'But you think he's dead or something.'

'I don't think anything, Max. It's gonna be alright, yeah?'

'Why did he have to follow her? He should have stayed here with us.'

'Yeah, he should have.'

'It's my fault he went.' He sniffed loudly, wiped snot with his sleeve.

'It's not, Max.'

'Yeah, it is.'

'He's the adult, Max. He's the parent. Not you, not either of us. He was supposed to stay here with us. Just like he was supposed to be here that afternoon when Mum left. He was supposed to be the one to

find her gone, but he was off… dicking around. If he wasn't such an arsehole Mum would have stayed.'

Max frowned at me. I could see his mind ticking over. 'What do you mean?'

I wanted to tell him what I meant. I wanted to tell him what I knew about Dad, but that would mean destroying the picture he had of Dad. I couldn't do it. I knew too much what it felt like to realise your father wasn't the hero you thought he was. I knew it meant your childhood was over.

'Nothing. I just… don't blame yourself.' I shifted closer to him, put my arm around his shoulder. I pulled him in and tried to remember the last time I'd hugged him. 'He was the one that decided to follow Kara.'

'I freakin' hate Kara.'

'Yeah, Maximum.' I tried to laugh. 'We all know you hate Kara.'

'Maybe she kidnapped Dad.'

'That's probably it. Dunno how she expects us to pay for his ransom, though. She's spent all his money.'

'Bitch.'

'That's my boy.'

That night we moved our mattresses into the living room, partly to be near the warmth of the fire. Partly to be closer to each other.

The snow kept falling. Every morning we woke up, the scene outside was greyer than the day before, softer around the edges like it would eventually go completely out of focus and fade away. We made a significant dint on the can supply. Started cooking rice, boiling the water over the fire. Time sagged over the frame of the days and we played endless cards and Trivial Pursuit.

I rationed myself to one song on my iPod a day to save the batteries. I would lie on my stomach by the fire and draw. I drew the stack of wood in the kitchen. I drew our clothes drying on a makeshift line strung between the dining chairs like bunting. I drew Lokey snowboarding down a mountain of glowing snow.

There was no news of Dad.

We finished all the bread, and baked bean sandwiches became a memory of indulgence. Steaks and pizza and hot chips took on mythical qualities.

Mrs White visited again. She sat on the edge of our couch with her ankles crossed, feet squashed into the space left between the couch and my mattress. I made her a cup of tea, heating the water on the fire. I didn't like to use the drinking water, but she had brought us a Cherry Ripe each and it would seem pretty stingy not to offer her a

cup of tea. (She seemed surprised a teenager knew how to make tea.) She talked a lot, mainly about running low on dog food and her poor garden suffocating beneath the snow. Max told her about explorers that got lost in Antarctica and ate their sled dogs. She smiled politely.

'Are you able to keep warm enough, Mrs White?' I asked, remembering that my grandma used to struggle in the cold.

'It isn't so bad. And Mr White is very organised. He's gathered all the firewood and worked out exactly how long it will last and how much we can use each day. The same with the food, he's drawn up a big diagram so we both know how much to eat and when. Caught me stealing a bag of crisps, and well, didn't he do his block then!' She looked away and patted her carefully arranged hair.

'It's very difficult, not being able to contact our girls. Mr White finds that hard, I know he worries.' She gazed out the window as she spoke and it was like she was talking to herself. 'He gets himself very worked up over things and I should work harder not to upset him. He's only trying to look after us.' She paused and was quiet for a few minutes, sipping her tea. 'Well. I should get back or he will worry! You boys behave yourselves, won't you?'

As if we might be thinking of throwing a wild party and passing out on the lawn.

In the evening I drew Mr White in his business shirt with the *Financial Review* tucked under his arm. His grey hair was slicked back in the style it always was whenever I saw him over the fence. I drew him with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and the food chart he had made etched into the skin of his forearms.

Later we heated water and poured it into the bath so it was an inch deep. I washed using a pink washer printed with daisies. My grandma used to call a face-washer a flannel. I remembered her washing me in the bath as a kid – me trying to convince her I was old enough to do it myself. She has been dead two years, the last of my grandparents to go. In the light of one of Kara's sandalwood candles with the cold stinging me, I was glad for the small mercy that she had been spared this.

The gun nudges into my skull and I am pulled back to the present. With my cheek pressed against the bricks I wonder if I will get to grow old, with kids and grandkids and a garden. I wonder if I will even see the next day.

Seven

Yelling. A woman's voice. It echoed through the silence, finding us when we were still in our beds. Half asleep, I pulled on some clothes.

'Stay here,' I said to Max.

'Yeah right,' he said with sarcasm.

We walked up the hill toward the noise. Starvos was standing in the doorway of his shop. The woman was throwing her arms up.

'You can't close! You have all that food in there! You can't!'

'I can do what I want,' Starvos said.

The woman saw me. 'He's closing!' she said, as if she expected me to do something about it. 'He's keeping it all for himself.' She turned back to Starvos. 'First you rip us off and now this. You selfish bastard!'

'It's my stock! I can do what I want with it.' He stepped behind the glass door and tried to push it shut as the woman blocked it with her foot. He flung open the door and shoved her away, stumbling back she slipped on the ice, falling on her side. 'You stupid bitch! Get off my property!'

'Oi!' I jogged over.

Starvos glared at me, jutted his chin out. 'Fin, you stay out of this. This is my business.'

'You can't do that,' I said.

'Watch me.' He closed the door in my face.

I went to the woman on the ground, took her arm and tried to help her up. 'Are you okay?'

She turned her face to me, eyes red with tears. 'Don't touch me,' she said, hitting me away. 'You could have helped me get in there. Thanks for nothing.'

'I'm sorry, I—'

'Useless.' She got to her feet and I watched her trudge away with a limp.

Max stood there, his mouth hanging open. 'Starvos totally pushed that lady! I can't believe he did that!'

I turned him away, my hand on his shoulder. 'Come on. Let's just get home. We've got stuff to figure out.'

Max sat on the kitchen bench with a pen and an exercise book on his lap. I stood in front of the open pantry cupboard, pulled each item out one by one, named it and put it on the bench: two cans of baked beans, one kilo of rice, one sachet of burrito seasoning, half a packet of almonds, almost-empty jar of Vegemite, almost-empty jar of honey, and on and on until everything had been listed. We then sat down at

the dining table and worked out how much food we would eat each day and how long what we had was going to last us. Two weeks, at the most.

In the evening, after Max was already asleep, Lokey came back. He wandered into the living room and slumped on the couch.

'I had to get out, man. My mum is driving me freakin' nuts.' He tilted his head back, closed his eyes.

'You drove here?'

'Yeah. Got chains on the tyres. Nearly outta petrol, but it's not like I need to go anywhere. Your dad hasn't shown up?'

'No.'

'He's probably okay, the roads are just blocked.'

'I'm trying not to think about it.'

We sat in silence. Eventually Lokey opened his eyes, yawned. 'You got any cards?' Lokey's eyes roamed the room, his gaze landing on Dad's liquor cabinet. 'Actually, I got a better idea.'

The idea of numbness was appealing. The thought had crossed my mind before but I hadn't wanted to get wasted on my own. It felt kind of pathetic. And desperate.

'We can have a bit, Loke. Not heaps. If my dad ever comes back he'll kill me.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

Dad collected booze like some people collected stamps – he would get all excited over a rare vintage. All I was thinking about when I selected the oldest, most expensive-looking bottle that I could find – and the bottle after that, and the bottle after that – was how he'd chosen to go after Kara that night and left us behind.

Eight

I drew Lucy. I drew her sitting cross-legged on the roof of our school bus while floodwaters rose around it. All sorts of objects bobbed on top of the water: toasters, television sets, computer monitors. I know they would have sunk in the real world, but I wasn't sure the same rules applied any more.

Days passed. I didn't touch the wine again.

Max and I were playing Monopoly when we heard it. The sound of the engine rumbled down the street like the low groan of a tired animal. We rushed to the front door, practically tripping over each other to get there.

People were crowded around the truck. Two guys in army uniforms stood on the back, on the tray, passing boxes down. The sight of them was almost overwhelming – just the relief of knowing that we weren't forgotten gave me a lump in my throat. Max and I ran over to the truck, one of the officers gave us each a box.

'Hey, is the snow radioactive? Is the air radioactive?' I asked.

'The levels are low,' he answered. He wasn't wearing a protective suit, so that was a good sign.

'Will it get worse?'

'Try to stay inside.' He moved onto the next person.

We carried our boxes inside. Unpacking them felt like Christmas. There was dried fruit, some nuts, bags of rice, more cans of soup. Water. Matches. I added the new supplies to our list and worked out how to ration it.

I listened to my one iPod song while lying on my back with my head up against the lounge-room window, looking up at the grey ache of the sky. For those three minutes and forty-eight seconds the weight of the smog and cloud couldn't touch me. I was free of it.

Two weeks passed. We began sleeping in the same bed, it was warmer that way. Even though I had been careful only to light the fire during the day, firewood began to run low. We cocooned ourselves in beanies and gloves.

I learned that if I could keep my thoughts about Dad focused on the afternoon when I found the letter from Mum, I could almost stem my anxiety about his absence. My anger formed a nice protective cushion. If I let it slide to the other things – those days when he would carry me up the hill on his back or my memory of him slipping me fifty-dollar notes under the table during childhood games of Monopoly – worry would fester in my gut and even though I was so,

so hungry, I couldn't eat.

As for Mum, I imagined her in some sort of command centre, consulting people in uniforms, pointing at diagrams. I imagined her safe.

And when I slept, I dreamed of Lucy.

Another knock at the door. Mid-morning. I was drawing while Max told me about a guy who survived a tsunami by ripping his front door from its hinges and surfing the wave. (He didn't have a lot of concrete facts.)

I think we both assumed it would be the army at the door, back with more food. We were sticking to our rations and it seemed to be working pretty well, but I'd gladly accept some more, even just for a bit of variety. (Not to mention the hazards of continually eating baked beans in a confined space.) The figure through the peephole wasn't wearing an army uniform. I opened the door and realised it was Mick from across the road, Ellen's husband. It took me a moment to recognise him beneath the thick stubble that had swallowed up half his face.

'Hey mate.' He ran a hand over his shaggy hair. 'How you going?'

'Yeah okay.'

'Any news about your dad?'

'No.'

'Right.' Mick nodded, waited for a moment out of respect. 'Look, I was just wondering if you had any food you could spare us. We've run out of that stuff the army brought around.'

'Um, yeah so have we.'

'You don't have any spare?'

I didn't even hesitate. The lie came straight out without a beat. 'No. I mean I've got some for tonight and a bit for tomorrow but that's it.'

'Yeah, sure. It's just we've run out of food for the kids.'

I hesitated. 'I can give you some rice. Just, like a cup. We don't have much left.'

'Would you, mate? That'd be awesome.'

'Sure, um, can you take off your shoes though?'

Mick slipped off his Volleys and stepped inside. I closed the door behind him.

'Wait here if you want, I'll go grab the rice.' I tried to make it sound like I was saving him the trouble of coming into the kitchen rather than hiding our food from him. I went to the cupboard and measured out two mugs full of rice, poured them into a sandwich bag and tied a knot in the top. I brought the bag out to Mick.

'Oh, man, you're a lifesaver.'

‘No worries.’

Max watched as I handed the bag to Mick. It was a pathetic amount of rice. Max didn’t say anything but there was a question in his eyes. When Mick was gone he looked at me like I was thick.

‘Why did you do that? We don’t have enough!’

‘We do have enough. They’ve run out.’

‘What’s the point of rationing it and going fucking hungry if you’re going to give it away?

‘Oi! Don’t swear.’

‘It’s not fair, Fin. I’m not going with less tonight. That’s come out of yours.’

‘Whatever, Max.’

Later on, I drew Mick wading through chest-high water with a beanie pulled down over his ears. He held the little bag of rice in one hand.

Nine

The police came back. Rather, one of them came back. The CSI wannabe, no Constable Lund. I thought it was a bit weird that he was on his own as I assumed they travelled in pairs, like Jehovah's Witnesses. He asked if he could come inside and, because of the cop shows on TV, I thought he was going to tell me they had found Dad's car wrapped around a tree. It wasn't supposed to be like that – he was the parent, I was the irresponsible teenager.

I asked him to take his shoes off and he took his hat off too, making me feel certain he was going to give us bad news.

'It's okay,' said CSI. 'You look worried. I just came to give you an update.'

I exhaled.

'I think we've located your dad. There's a Greg Heath staying at a refuge they've set up on the highway. Sorry it's taken so long.'

I smiled. It almost hurt my face, it had been that long since I had actually smiled. 'Max!' I called in the direction of the living room. 'Hey, Max! They've found Dad!'

'Might have,' said the cop. 'We haven't confirmed it's him.'

I didn't let myself hear that. I led CSI into the house. Max practically jumped up off the couch.

'When's he coming home?' he asked.

'Again, I have to confirm it's him,' said CSI. 'But soon, hopefully, buddy.' He walked casually around the place, sort of like he was looking for something. I thought he was just making sure we weren't living in complete squalor.

'There's thousands of people displaced by the snow,' he went on. 'And with all the phones down and the power out, relaying information is a nightmare. The army has been working to clear the roads so we can transport people and get them home, but rather than easing off, the snow's just getting worse. As I'm sure you've noticed.'

'Um, yeah.'

His eyes wandered in the direction of the kitchen. 'Where's your food? You got enough?'

'We're good.'

'Got it somewhere dry? You haven't stuck the box out the back have you? Someone'll nick it.'

'No, it's safe.'

He went into the kitchen and began opening cupboards.

'Hey, you don't have to do that,' I said. 'It's safe. It's taken care of.'

'As long as you've got the rice somewhere nice and dry. You don't

want it getting damp. Where is it?' He opened the corner cupboard, the pantry. 'You've got a bit here. Stock up early did you?'

'Yeah.' I walked over and closed the cupboard. He looked at me and our eyes stayed locked for a moment. 'It's fine. It's dry.'

'So you'll let us know about Dad?' said Max.

CSI kept his eyes on me, taking a minute before he turned to Max with a big smile.

'Absolutely. I'll be back to check up on you guys.'

I walked to the front door and opened it.

'I'll leave you guys to it.'

'Thanks,' Max said. ''Cause we're really busy, totally snowed under.' He started cracking up.

CSI gave a short laugh, then cleared his throat. 'Like I said, I'll be back.'

I didn't wait until he had finished putting his boots back on before I closed the door.

'You're a tool,' I said to Max. He responded with an awesome display of his superior intellect and gave me the finger.

I didn't know why exactly, but I felt sick in the stomach.

Ten

Our world was made of the dull light filtered through the gauze of the sky. It became a small, self-contained thing, a snow dome of our very own. The rest of the world may as well not have existed. CSI didn't come back with Dad. And I wasn't surprised. The army with their truck of dehydrated goodies didn't come back either. We didn't get a visit from Lokey or Mrs White or Mick. No one walked through the bleak picture framed by our living room window. I went back to Lucy's house, knocked on the door. Still nobody was there.

I had stopped testing the light switches ages ago.

I waited until we had finished all our other food before we started on the army rations. My jeans had started getting loose around my hips. We went days without words other than 'yes' and 'no'.

Eight weeks without power. Eight weeks since I last saw my dad. Ten since I last saw my mother.

When we ran out of newspaper to light the fire we started on Kara's magazines. When they were done we started burning books. It sounds like a horrible Nazi-style travesty, but all we were burning were Kara's self-help manuals and Dad's Jon Cleary collection. Problem was there weren't that many in the house and we soon ran out of those too.

In my social studies class we had done a unit on asylum seekers. A guy from a refugee advocacy group told us about the refugee camps in the Sudan; he said it was common for members of a family to take turns eating on alternate days.

I decided I would eat every second day.

Max didn't like it. He said he should do the same but I told him that was bullshit and that I was in charge.

Eleven

The axe was where I had last left it: around the side of the house, under the tarp, like the body of an accident victim. I picked it up, heavy in my hand, and walked down to where our back garden edged onto bushland. I selected my victim: a young grey gum, tall but relatively skinny. I swung the axe and the blade thudded into the trunk. I swung again and the blade landed several inches above the first cut. I tried again, making a third and equally inaccurate cut. Clearly there was a technique required that I had failed to factor in. There had to be an easier way. I looked back toward the house and my gaze fell on our patio, where the seven-piece timber outdoor setting Mum had chosen from Barbeques Galore stood unwittingly. I walked back across the lawn and up the patio steps. I pulled one chair away from the huddle, its legs scraped the concrete in protest. My hands were white with the cold and I was distracted for a moment by the way they looked like a skeleton's. I thought of my seventh birthday when my uncle Mark dressed up in a skeleton costume and I was so scared I peed myself in front of half my class, who were at the party.

I put one foot up on the seat of the chair and lifted the axe. Between the moment that I put my weight behind it to swing and the moment it cracked into the lacquered timber, I imagined it glancing off and carving through my ankle. I would bleed to death on the porch. At least it would be quicker than starving.

Would Max eat me? He should. I thought of how I should have told him – before I went out there – that if I accidentally cut my foot off and died, he should eat me to survive. Just like those rugby players in that plane crash movie we had to watch for PE. Take one for the team.

The axe split the seat of the chair and thudded into the concrete. It took longer to break up the chair than I thought it would. I took the dismembered parts into the house. I would chop up the rest as we needed them.

Twelve

We ran out of washing-up liquid so we started using laundry detergent. I started to take pride in keeping the kitchen orderly, didn't let the dirty plates stack up. Mornings were for the maintenance of the living space, afternoons free time. Free. Ha.

We waited for the army to show up again or the police with Dad. Neither did.

Mick came round again. Not as rectangular any more. A full beard. He told me Zac had bad asthma and Ellen had been vomiting. He had put chains on the tyres of his car and was going to take her and Zac to find a doctor.

'Can't Doctor Ketterly help?' I asked. 'At number nine? He's a surgeon or something.'

Mick shook his head, he'd clearly been down that road and it had worn him out. 'Zac needs medication, and Ellen… he says he can't help her. I'm going to try the hospital.'

He paused after he said that. He cleared his throat and looked away.

'Look, mate, you seem like a good kid.'

I didn't know what to say.

'I've got a box of canned stuff. I've been saving it, rationing it in case… You… you can have it if you look after Zadie for me.'

I opened my mouth but he put up his hands.

'I was going to ask Mrs White but she's not well either. I'm worried that if I take Zadie and we get stuck in the snow, well, we'll all be… cactus. Zadie likes you. She's a good little kid. She's out of nappies—'

'I don't know how to look after a kid.'

'Please mate. Please. I'll try not to be long. I don't know what else to do. I can't look after the three of them.' He smiled sadly. 'I'm up to my elbows in vomit.'

Beneath the beard and the big shoulders, Mick wasn't that much older than me, maybe ten years. He stood with his feet set apart and let out a ragged breath.

'Okay,' I said. I didn't let myself consider it too long. Max would think I'd lost my mind. I clearly had. After I told Mick I would look after Zadie and he went back to his place to get her, I reassured myself that when he came back I would tell him that I was really sorry, but there was no way I could do it. Except when he brought her around I failed to communicate this with the words that came out of my mouth: 'No worries, it'll be fine.' I found myself standing in the living room with a three-year-old and a giant My Little Pony that was

neither mine nor little. Oh, and Max who was somewhere between angry and amused at my stupidity.

'What are we supposed to do with her?' Max asked.

Zadie pointed to the fire and said in a very serious voice, 'Das da fire. You don touch da fire tis vewy, vewy hot.'

'Yeah, that's right!' I said to her in a happy voice.

'Fin, we'll have to share our food with her!'

'We've got enough, Max. I couldn't say no.'

'No dah.'

'Whosat?' Zadie said and pointed to Max.

'That's Max.'

'You Fim,' Zadie said, pointing to me.

'Yes, Fin.'

'Iz snowing outside. Ba you don touch da snow. Mummy touch da snow too much and den she chucked up.'

Zadie sat down on the floor and started to play with the buckle on her shoes.

Max and I looked at each other.

'Does that mean what I think it does, Fin?'

'I don't know.'

'Fin?'

'Max, I don't know.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah.'

Thirteen

I found our old Duplo in the garage and brought it in for Zadie to play with. That seemed to keep her occupied for a fair while and it was kind of nice having her there. It passed the time. In the afternoon she fell asleep sitting up surrounded by a sea of coloured plastic blocks, so I arranged the cushions from the sofa into a bed next to the fire and tucked her in with my old Transformers doona. She slept for over an hour and Max and I found ourselves just sitting there, waiting for her to wake up. When she did she saw us and started to cry. It wasn't just a few sobs either, it was distraught screaming as if she was in pain. I checked her all over, looking for some kind of injury but then Max put her up on his shoulders and galloped around like a horse and she seemed to like that.

The darkness was coming earlier and earlier every day and by four-thirty it was pretty much night. We ate dinner at five-thirty because by then everyone had well and truly run out of things to do. I heated up a can of soup on the fire, poured some into a little plastic bowl and gave it to Zadie with a teaspoon. She barely paused for breath as she ate it. When she was done she licked the bowl.

I didn't know when to expect Mick back. We had both stepped around the subject, knowing it could be hours or days. Part of me wanted to go with him to see what the rest of the world looked like. I couldn't imagine it.

He wasn't back by six-thirty so Max and I read Zadie a story and put her into bed. She insisted on hugging the storybook when it was finished and she went to sleep with our hardcover edition of *Pooh and Tigger Fly Kites*, which can't have been comfortable.

Later, before Max and I went to bed, I put some more wood on the fire as we could cope with the cold when it went out, but I wasn't sure about Zadie. Max read an old *National Geographic* magazine and told me that exposure to radiation is measured in units called millirem. The average American is exposed to three hundred and sixty millirem a year, three hundred from natural sources, sixty from man-made sources.

'I reckon that's probably gone up,' he said and cracked up at his own joke.

I spent the night somewhere between awake and asleep, partially listening for Mick's knock at the door. It didn't come.

And the army still hadn't turned up with more food.

Fourteen

He didn't even try knocking first, just rattled the door handle and started shouting. We were reading Zadie a story before her afternoon nap. The shouting cut into the room just as we were about to learn what Maisy Mouse liked to grow in her garden.

'Get out here, you little shits! You little punks! Where are ya?'

Then whoever it was thumped the door and I heard his footsteps leave the front porch and head up the side of the house.

'Who the hell is that?' Max asked.

Zadie started to cry. I heard the back door slide open. I got to my feet and met him as he was coming through the kitchen.

'Where is it, you little shit?'

It was Mr White. The only words we had ever exchanged were a polite 'hello' when I used to see him over the fence in the mornings. Now, his hands were fists at his sides, his face twisted with aggression, eyes popping.

'What?'

'The wood, you mongrel. Where's my firewood?' He pushed past me into the living room. Zadie started screaming.

'Where's my firewood?'

He used to get *The Australian* delivered.

'What firewood?'

He turned around and grabbed the front of my hoodie. 'The firewood you little shits stole from my yard!'

Max jumped to his feet, chest puffed. A bantam. 'Oi!'

Mr White shoved him away, provoking something inside that was curled up and lying dormant until that moment. I threw a punch. I missed. Mr White shoved me into the wall and I shoved him back. In my mind, detached, I stood outside watching the scene and it was hilarious. I was fighting Mr White in my living room. Okay, fighting might not be an accurate word but I was working up to it. I threw another punch. I got him this time, just in front of the ear. He went off – screaming, spittle showering my face, his fist landed in the hollow of my stomach. He'd had more practice then I had. I'd only been in a fight once before, in year five with Jason Esbit and it had involved mainly inaccurate kicking. I wasn't expecting my next fight to be with Mr White from number seventeen.

'We don't have your firewood!' yelled Max. All this was happening to the soundtrack of Zadie's high-pitched wail, like a siren or a very urgent ice-cream van. I yelled and pushed my hands into Mr White's face, not a classic fighting move, but effective. Hell, if I'd had a handbag I would have hit him over the head with it. He slapped my

hands away from his face.

'We're burning furniture,' Max yelled. 'Not your wood.'

Mr White's head snapped to the fireplace.

'It's the chairs from outside. Not your bloody wood.'

He dropped his hands to his knees, leaning forward. His back heaved with his breathing. Max picked up Zadie. Mr White straightened up. He looked back and forth between us, jaw rigid.

'It's the chairs from outside. We didn't nick your wood,' I repeated quietly.

He didn't say anything, just turned and walked out the back door, the way he had come in.

Fifteen

Zadie grew quiet. In the afternoon she vomited all over the Transformers doona.

Another day passed. Max sat next to Zadie and read her books.

Water was okay but our supply of food was getting low.

I had never seen such stillness. There was not even the movement of shadow as the day passed. There were no shadows. I wondered where the birds had gone. I wondered if they were dead from the cold. Where do birds go to die? Do they drop from the sky while they are flying – their hearts stopping dead like my gran's when she was at church, halfway up the aisle to get communion?

Now there is movement, lots of it. Mainly the movement of my head, my cheek slamming into the brickwork. I imagine how the scene would look from behind us, I see the arch of the torchlight up the brick walls. I see the white pressure marks from his fingers in my neck. There is spittle in my ear and I have had no practise at fighting since last time. I'm not really doing a whole lot of fighting anyway, you don't, when there's a gun pressed into your skull. And now things seem to slow down. I feel a creeping warmth up the back of my neck. A comfortable warmth nestling in the base of my skull. I close my eyes.

Sixteen

Two cans of tomato soup, a handful of sultanas and a cup of rice left. Two and a half litres of water though. That was a plus.

Still no Mick.

Zadie vomited again, twice. She was quiet and slept a lot. We fed her soup from a teaspoon and did not talk about what was happening to her.

Mum had said not to go into the city, but I couldn't imagine that everyone there had been left for as long as us without more rations. The thought that we might have been abandoned was beginning to follow me around and I couldn't shake it. If Mum was still there she would have a plan. Leaving would mean letting go of the hope that Dad would come back for us.

If we were to go we would need a car. Either way we would need more food.

I decided to go for a walk, see if I could track down more food. I wasn't naive enough to believe that someone would just hand food over without anything in exchange. My eyes roamed the living room for something I could trade. They landed on Dad's liquor cabinet. I selected three bottles of whisky and placed them carefully in a plastic grocery bag.

When I finally prepared to go, as I looked at Max and told him that I would be back, I thought about what the air would feel like outside on the street, what the space would feel like. I remembered going on holidays to the Great Barrier Reef, riding out on the clear sea in a boat with Mum and Dad and Max. My diving mask fogging up again and again as we waited to plunge into the blue. ('Don't breathe through your nose, matey,' Dad had to keep reminding me.) The expectation of it was an ache in my stomach. The space, above and below. It was freeing, that endless space. But at the same time intensely threatening, like the grey that seemed to now stretch on forever.

The asphalt was smothered in snow, unbroken by footprints or tyre tracks. I kept to the side of the road where there was grass beneath the snow – better traction. I didn't want my palms skinned by the ice if I lost my footing. My feet sunk into the grey. I climbed the hill and felt like I was climbing into the sky.

When I reached the bus stop at the top of the hill I stopped. The cold was brutal, sharp in my lungs. I started to cry. I let myself because I couldn't cry in front of Max. I cried for the year sevens that scrambled to get on the bus. I cried for Lucy and my school and Lokey

and Mr Effrez. I had never felt the merciless roll of time like I did then. The pull of it, always in one direction. No going back. I wanted to fall onto my knees and howl but I knew that I would do that and then I'd stand up again and I'd have to keep going and nothing would be any different. But I did let myself cry. I didn't bother to wipe the tears away, I let them go. I imagined that the moment they hit the cold ground, their warmth would melt the snow for just a fraction of a second before they became part of it.

I looked up the road toward the highway, the route my bus used to take to school, the way out. The red bricks of some of the houses stood out stubbornly against the cover of grey. I made my way past Starvos' shop. Posters advertising Cornettos and Pura milk and a scratch and match Coca-Cola competition popped colour. Above the shop the blinds were drawn across the windows of Starvos' flat.

There was no plan. I didn't know where I was going, I guess I thought I'd just keep walking until I saw somebody else, someone who might give me some food. I trudged, eyes searching the blank façade of each house. And then I saw it, further up the street. Someone closing the roller door of their garage. Walking up their path, opening the front door.

'Wait!' I ran toward the house. 'Wait!'

Of course they heard me. There was no other sound. The figure looked over his shoulder. I jogged toward him, up the driveway.

It was Arnold Wong.

I stopped. 'Hey,' I said quietly.

Arnold Wong didn't say anything. He looked at me. In his left hand was one of those green enviro bags. Whatever was in it looked heavy.

'Um, I'm Fin,' I said slowly.

'I know who you are.'

'Okay, cool, it's just I wasn't sure if… okay.'

'What do you want?'

'Can I talk to you for a second?'

The look on his face served to highlight the fact that I was already talking to him whether he liked it or not.

'I live just down the street, round the corner, down the hill, Bellbird… um, look, do you know where I can find some food? We're out. It's just my brother and me. And our neighbour's little girl.'

He looked at me, expressionless. 'Come inside,' he said. He went through the front door and left it open behind him. I took off my shoes and went inside.

The warmth met me as soon as I entered the hall. There was a living room on the right. It had thick brown shag-pile carpet and furniture that looked like it had been found at Vinnie's, it was crazy-

tidy. I followed Arnold down the hall further until it opened into a kitchen on the right. The kitchen had the same old-fashioned vibe as the living room: orange tiles and green laminate bench tops, totally spotless. Other than the cans of food, which Arnold took from the green bag and stacked in the pantry, there were no clues that the world had fallen into disorder. Arnold didn't look at me or say anything, so I just stood there. A small part of me was tempted to say, 'Well, how about this weather!' but I didn't. Arnold emptied the bag and then turned to me.

'When did you last eat?'

'Yesterday.'

He looked at me as if I was a bug he was deciding to squash or not, sort of detached. I couldn't meet his stare.

The fridge was covered in photographs, lots of a couple I assumed to be his parents.

'My dad's missing,' I blurted out. 'Haven't seen him since this all started.'

Arnold's eyes softened a little. 'I'll get you some food.'

'No, hey. I'm not after yours. I just thought you might know—'

He ignored me, went down the hall and out the front door. I waited in the kitchen. The melted snow in the drainpipes outside dripped like the tick of a clock. The photographs were stuck to the fridge with neon alphabet magnets. There were a lot from what looked like Asian countries, maybe they went to visit family. There were some with African school children. There was a postcard with a portrait of another family, parents and three kids. Beneath the photograph it read '*Pray for the Kellys on mission in South-East Asia*' and there was a web address.

The front door opened and closed. Arnold came into the kitchen with the green bag. He handed it to me. I took it.

'You don't have to do this.'

'I know,' he said.

'Okay. Hey, do you want these?' I held out the bag of whisky bottles. 'In exchange…'

He frowned.

'It's whisky.'

Arnold raised an eyebrow. There was almost a smile. 'Keep it.'

'Okay. Thanks.' I turned to leave.

'I have some orange juice. Would you like some?' It sounded more like an exam question than an invitation.

'Oh. Sure. Thank you.'

'Sit down.'

'Okay.' I sat in one of the orange vinyl kitchen chairs.

Arnold opened a cupboard and took out two orange and mango

Poppas. He handed me one and sat down in the other chair. He didn't speak and I wasn't exactly bursting with conversation starters, so we just sat there sipping juice through our straws like we were six-year-olds.

'Are, um, your parents around?' I asked when I couldn't handle the silence any longer.

Arnold didn't answer right away. Then his gaze flicked away. 'They're gone. They were over there, when the missiles hit. They were working for a church.'

'Shit. That's really intense.'

'Yes.'

I finished my juice and stood up.

'I should get back to my brother.'

Arnold got up. I followed him down the hall. He opened the front door.

'When you've run out again, come back,' he said. He didn't look at me when he said that, his gaze remained focused out the door, looking into the distance.

I went out. Hesitating on the front step I turned back.

'Really, thank you.'

'It's nothing.'

'I'm… I'm… you know… sorry you copped it at school.'

His eyes met mine. 'Are you sorry you treated me like shit or are you sorry that I'm the one who has the food?'

I swallowed. 'Um…'

'Don't worry about it.' He closed the door.

Seventeen

Mick came back. He was slighter, somehow smaller, like a building with its foundations sinking into the ground.

'Is she still here?' he asked, swallowing. His face had lost colour. I could see the wiry roots of his black beard beneath his skin. I led him inside. I didn't ask him to take his shoes off. He didn't look like he could manage it.

'Dadda! Dadda!'

He saw Zadie lying in her bed. He grabbed the doorframe to steady himself. Then he went to her, dropped to his knees, cupped her little head and pressed his nose into her hair. He looked up at me.

'I'm sorry,' I said. As if there was anything I could have done to prevent her getting sick.

Tears ran down over the sharp drop of his cheekbones and into his beard.

'Where's Mummy?' Zadie asked.

He closed his eyes and pulled her small body to him. She laughed.

'Do you want a tea? We've got tea. You look cold.'

He shook his head

'Where's Mummy? Where's Zac?'

'Zac's at home, sweetie.'

'Where's Mummy?'

He looked at me again and I could see the answer.

I stuffed Zadie's clothes into her bag and gave it to Mick.

'It's messed up out there, Fin,' he said quietly.

'Where did you go?'

'The community hall first. But there wasn't much help there. A lot of folding chairs and some first-aid kits. No doctors, just some SES guys. I asked them if the hospital was still open and they said they didn't know. There's no communication. All the batteries in their two-ways are flat. I drove down the mountains to the hospital. The highway was closed, barricaded off. But there were no cops there so I drove through. It took an age with the roads iced over but I got to the hospital. It was madness. No power. The back-up generator had died.' He paused.

'Were there doctors there?'

'Some. They were doing their best to help people. They found beds for them, they helped Zac, they had medication for him. But Ellen… they couldn't… they couldn't do anything.' He looked to the ground. 'Dehydration,' he said quietly. 'She couldn't keep anything down and there weren't enough fluids for a drip. Dehydration got her.'

'I'm so sorry.'

His tears came in a silent stream. He rubbed his palms over his face. ‘Apparently people from the country are more at risk of radiation poisoning. Something about less exposure meaning less tolerance to radiation. What the hell is happening, Fin? I mean.’ He looked around, gestured outside. ‘This is insane. I keep on expecting to wake up, my wife will be next to me, I’ll swear at the alarm, drag myself out of bed and go to work…’

‘I know.’

We both gazed out the window at the soft, grey picture of our backyard, the tops of the trees melting into the sky, the axe leaning against the half-demolished outdoor setting.

‘Do you have any food?’ I asked.

‘No, not really.’

‘We’ve got a little bit, I met a guy up the street. A guy I went to school with, he gave me a bit more… I was hoping the army would have come back.’

‘Fin, I didn’t see any sign of them the whole time I was out.’

‘They said they’d come back,’ said Max.

‘I know, but I’m telling you, I didn’t see any trace of them. A couple of SES blokes, that’s it. They didn’t have any food, either.’

‘Take some of our cans,’ I said.

Mick looked at me with a steady gaze. He munched his lips a little. He wanted to say no, I could see it. But he needed the food.

‘Thanks, mate,’ he said quietly.

I put two cans of beans in Zadie’s bag. Mick picked Zadie up with one arm and took her bag with the other. Zadie gripped her pony by its fuzzy pink neck. We watched them walk up the driveway.

Silence found a new space in our house.

Eighteen

We saw the cop walking down the driveway, didn't hear the car pull up. It was CSI. I was at the door before he had time to knock.

'Hi there,' he said in a voice that was more *Play School* host than cop. He looked like he could do with a shave and his shirt was crumpled. I noticed he wasn't wearing a name badge. I opened the screen door a little, meaning to come out and talk to him, but instead he pushed past me, striding into the kitchen. He gave Max a little salute.

'So, how you guys doing?'

'Okay, did you confirm it was Dad?'

'Pardon?'

'Did you confirm it was Dad? Are you bringing him back?'

'Oh, no. Ah, no movement on that as yet.'

'But you said it was probably him. And he was on the highway, I mean, that's not heaps far away – it'd be easy to check and bring him back here.'

CSI straightened his back a bit as if he was trying to make himself bigger. He reminded me of the footy dickheads at school. 'Like I got nothing better to do! We are pretty busy, buddy.' He sniggered.

He walked around with his hands on the bulky holster on his hips. He couldn't seem to keep still. I noticed he didn't have a gun.

'Look buddy – what's your name again?'

'Fin.'

'Yeah, Fin, I'll tell you what we're doing: we're going around to every house and collecting all the food people have got. We're going to redistribute it equally so that everyone will have enough.'

I frowned. 'We don't have much left.'

'That's why we're doing it. You'll get a lot more.' He started walking toward the pantry.

I cut in front of him. 'I don't think we want to do that. We'll just hang onto what we've got.' The thought of some system – a plan, someone making decisions somewhere – was comforting. But something had changed in me. Maybe it was the way my whole world had closed down, had become simpler. I was sharper somehow. Instincts were kicking in and I was running with them.

'No choice, buddy.' He flashed a piece of paper in front of me. I didn't have time to read it. Then he took his radio and said, 'Yeah, this is PP2, just picking up from Bellbird Crescent now. Meet you back up top in ten.' He clipped his radio back onto his belt and made to move past me. I blocked him again, stepping backward in front of the pantry.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Buddy, I’m taking it. I’ll be back with more this arvo.’ He held my gaze for a second and then tried to push past me.

‘You’re lying.’ As I put the words out there my mouth went dry.

‘What?!’ His hand now rested on his baton. ‘I have a warrant to seize any food items you have here.’

‘Show me the warrant.’

‘I already showed you the warrant.’

‘That was a library fine or some shit. You’ve got nothing.’

‘Mate, move.’

‘No.’

He laughed. ‘If you don’t move I’m going to have to arrest you.’

‘Arrest me then.’

He shook his head and took his radio from his belt. He spoke into it.

‘Yeah radio, this is Springwood sixteen. I got resistance, gonna have to bring one in.’

‘You can stop playing pretend with your radio. The battery’s flat.’

He cocked his head to the side and gave me a little smirk. He clipped the radio back onto his belt and took his baton from it. He raised it above his shoulder.

‘Give me the food. I won’t hesitate to use this, buddy.’

‘Go on.’

‘GIVE ME THE FOOD!’

‘No,’ I said quietly.

I could see the white of his knuckles through his skin as he gripped the baton. He drew it back.

‘Put it down.’ It was Max. I didn’t even see him come into the kitchen. He stood behind CSI, two hands gripping the axe.

‘Put the baton down and get out!’ Now it was Max pulling the TV cop stuff.

CSI turned around slowly.

‘Drop the baton.’

‘No need to get upset, buddy—’

‘I’m not your buddy. Drop the baton and get out.’

CSI didn’t move.

‘I’m telling you, dick-face, I haven’t eaten and I’m feeling a bit crazy. I could do *anything*. I could chop your head off and then Fin and I could, like, barbecue your arms and stuff.’ Max smiled.

CSI lowered the baton a bit, his eyes looked from Max to me to the front door and back again.

‘Just give me the baton,’ I said to CSI, as slowly and calmly as I could.

‘Alright, alright.’ He handed it to me.

‘Now piss off.’

CSI walked to the door, Max was behind him with the axe.

CSI paused. ‘Oh, and it was your dad that we found. He’s in the morgue.’ The door slammed behind him.

I slid down the pantry door and sat on the lino. ‘Barbecue your arms?’ I tried to laugh. Max didn’t say anything. Eventually I stood up and told him to lock all the doors and windows. He didn’t respond.

‘Max, come on. He’s lying. Dad’s not dead.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do. Get up. We need to lock the place up. And thanks. You’re pretty scary with an axe.’

Almost a smile.

Nineteen

We didn't sleep much. The next day I took to the outside table with the axe and chopped it all up. I was getting good with the axe, efficient. Max stood at the back door and watched, holding a knife. I had no idea what he was going to do with the knife if CSI came back. Can't say that either of us was very experienced in handling weapons. We lugged all the wood inside and stacked it in the living room.

'What'll we burn next?' Max asked.

'That.' I motioned toward the dining suite.

A truck engine.

We were out the door and on the street. It was an army truck coming down the hill. I felt my body loosen with relief, we hadn't been forgotten. People emerged from the other houses, faces barely visible beneath beanies and scarves. Mr White was one of them, but he avoided eye contact. I was just letting the edge of the idea of more food enter my mind when the truck stopped a few houses up the road, outside the Ketterleys' place. Two army guys jumped down from the cabin and slammed the doors shut. People moved toward them, but the army guys didn't even look in their direction, walking straight up the Ketterlys' driveway. If they were bringing food wouldn't they carry it in? I waited, watching. A few moments later they came back with Doctor Ketterly, his wife and their two kids. One army guy opened the door at the back of the truck. It was one of those ones with a big canvas cover over the back: a troop carrier. The Ketterlys climbed in, then the army dudes got in and the engine started.

'Hey!' someone yelled.

I ran up the road to the truck. I reached it just as they were about to pull away from the kerb. The army guys didn't seem to see me. I slapped at the window.

'Hey, stop!'

The driver ignored me and continued to pull away from the kerb.

'Stop,' I yelled. 'Where's our food? We've run out of food!'

Neither of them looked at me. They drove down to the bottom of the hill and did a U-turn. As the truck rumbled up the hill toward us, me and some others, Mr White included, went out and stood in the middle of the road, waving our arms. 'Stop!'

The bullbar of the truck kept coming toward us, it got closer and closer. It wasn't going to stop. At the last moment we scattered out of its way.

'Hey! Hey!' I tried to run after it, but my feet slipped on the ice. I landed on my hands and knees. Blood leached from the heels of my

palms. Orange, like rust, smudged on the ice.

I watched the truck drive away.

Twenty

I saw Mick through the window as he was throwing bags into the back of his ute. I went across the road.

'We're off,' he said.

He'd seen the thing with the army truck and said they didn't give a crap about us. He swung the last suitcase into the back. Zadie and Zac watched from inside the house. I could see them standing in the window. Zadie was wearing her mittens. She pressed her nose up against the glass and looked at Max and me. I waved to her. She waved back but didn't smile.

'I've got all the food we have left: flour, sugar, desiccated coconut. All the stuff I never considered before. Been mixing it with water.' He laughed and shook his head. He looked at me for a moment, then pulled me into a hug. I could feel the xylophone bumps of his rib cage.

'You fellas take care. You got a plan?'

'Mum's in Sydney. I'm thinking we need to get to her.'

'Yeah. You can't stay here.'

He pressed something into my hand. A key. He cocked his head toward Ellen's purple station wagon.

'Take it when you need it,' he said. 'Can you drive?'

'Not legally.'

'Ha. That's the least of your problems.'

We ate the last can of soup. Arnold Wong said to come back when we ran out, didn't he? Could I go back? If we were going to try to make it to the city, we would need to take supplies.

I wondered how many others were sick. It was easy to forget that anyone else in the world still existed. Was Mrs White sick? Had she died? I wanted to go and see her, but Mr White…

What about her dogs?

Oh God.

'Max, I'm going to go and find more food. Then we're going to go find Mum.'

'What if Dad comes back?'

'We'll leave a note.'

I pushed the key into the ignition and started the car. I reversed it carefully onto the road and turned the wheel so the car was facing up the hill. I pressed the accelerator and it moved forward a little before the tyres started to spin on the ice.

'Shit.' I hit the steering wheel. 'Shit, shit, shit!'

Mick hadn't put chains on the tyres. And even if we did have some in the garage I wouldn't know what the hell to do with them.

The walk took so long. Every step was merciless. I used to be a good long-distance runner. Reasonably good. I did regionals. The running was good but I really liked the end. I liked the moment when you let your body fall onto the grass and you open up your lungs and your head thuds and you know you've really done something. It's like a free pass to sit on your arse for the rest of the week. I loved that first gulp of cool water in my throat. I loved the relief when it was over.

The walk up the hill felt like the last two hundred metres of a race, after every step I felt that I couldn't do any more. I stopped halfway up and dry wretched. My guts were protesting, screaming for food

I made it up the hill. I wanted to sit down, but I'd only have to get up again. There were tyre tracks in the snow along Arnold's street. People must have started to get out, chains or no chains.

There was a small cluster of people standing out in the snow. Men. One saw me and approached. He was about my dad's age. Beard. But then didn't everyone have a beard now? Everyone but me, it seemed.

'You got food, buddy?'

'No.'

'Where you going?'

'A mate's.'

'He got food?'

'No.' I passed him and somehow found the energy to quicken my pace. He followed me. I went up Arnold Wong's drive.

'You sure about that, buddy?' said the man. I ignored him. I knocked on Arnold's door.

''Cause I got a family,' he said.

Everyone's got a family. The door opened, Arnold looked at me and then at the bearded bloke. I didn't wait for an invitation. I went in and shut the door behind me.

'Sorry,' I said to Arnold. 'That guy's hassling me for food.'

Arnold regarded me sceptically. Suddenly I felt like I was on a boat, the ground shifted. I held the wall to steady myself.

'You need to sit down,' Arnold observed. I was going to aim to do so in a chair, but it appeared I didn't have time for that. My arse found the floor.

'Put your head between your legs,' Arnold said. He went into the kitchen and I took his advice. Soon he was back next to me and there was the peel of a can opening. I could smell it. I could taste the baked beans before they were in my mouth. He put the can in one of my hands and a spoon in the other.

‘Eat.’

I did. I ate half, then I breathed and looked up at Arnold who was leaning on the doorframe of the living room. I held the can out to him. He shook his head.

‘Finish it.’

Arnold’s couch was green with brown stripes, the kind of green that lives on the surface of a pond. It was ugly as hell but when I sat down it welcomed me the way the modular thing that Kara chose for our place never did. The whole room was like something out of a museum. The television was one of those ones from the sixties that are encased in wood and stand on little legs. There were walls of books – lots of titles I didn’t recognise – books about Romans and Hebrews and lots of philosophy-type things. A slow-combustion fire glowed in the corner of the room. There was a gap where a dining suite should have been.

Arnold handed me a mug of tea and sat opposite me. He watched me drink it.

‘Were your parents there long, before…?’ I didn’t know where to go with the question.

‘Four months. They were advised to come back home two months before the missiles, but they chose to stay.’

‘Yeah. Right. They leave you on your own?’

‘My uncle was here. He went into the city after the attacks to try and find more information about my mum and dad.’ Arnold smiled. ‘Not a lot of point when you’re talking nuclear missiles. He was supposed to come back, but like your father, he hasn’t.’

It’s a strange reaction, but I felt myself relax a bit when Arnold told me that. There was something in the fact that we both knew close to exactly what the other was feeling.

‘A cop came to my house and tried to take our food,’ I said, after a while. ‘When we still had some.’

‘Really?’ He sounded polite, not surprised.

‘Have you seen anyone from the army or the SES, anyone?’

‘Not for weeks.’

I felt like I was at a therapist’s, the kind who says very little to get you to fill in the silence. Not that I’d been to a therapist. If we survived this I’d probably need to, everyone would. It would be a boon for therapists.

I told him about the army truck in my street. He did seem surprised about that.

‘I thought they were bringing more food, but they just went to a family up the street and took them away. I tried to ask them when they would bring more food but they ignored me, nearly ran me over.’

‘Which family?’

‘The Ketterleys. They live in that big-arse place.’

‘Why would the army take them?’

‘Dunno. The bloke’s some top-notch surgeon. Don’t know if that’s got anything to do with it.’

‘We’ve been left behind,’ Arnold said, matter-of-factly.

‘Do you really think they’re just going to let people starve to death? I mean, I know it’s starting to look that way, but…’

‘Think about it. The world has fallen into a nuclear winter. There is no sunlight, no food production. The radiation in the northern hemisphere would have wiped heaps of people out. There’s not going to be any more food imported. There is a finite amount left. The government, the authorities, would have a plan for this.’

‘Exactly.’

‘A plan that would involve preserving certain people and letting others perish. They can’t feed everyone.’

I sighed. ‘Do you have much left?’ I asked him.

He shook his head.

I had an overwhelming urge to consume a vast amount of alcohol again and looked around to see if the Wongs had a liquor cabinet. I never expected to spend my last days getting drunk with Arnold Wong.

I put my empty mug down. I saw Death come and sit in the room with us. Just like the dude from *The Mighty Boosh*: black robes, skeleton hands. How did it feel to starve to death? Did I already know?

‘I think me and my brother are going to leave, go to the city. My mum might still be there, she works with the government, disaster response management. I think she’ll know what to do… You should come with us… More people, more heat, more furniture to burn. There’s safety in numbers.’

‘There’s still the problem of food.’

I tilted my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes. Then the idea came to me.

‘I know where we can get some.’

Twenty-one

Max wasn't moving. The house was in near-darkness with only the smoulder of cinders lighting the room. There was a smell, a sweet chemical sort of smell a little like when I was ten and tried to bake Mum a cake using a Tupperware container instead of a tin. Mum had to scrape the blue goop off the bottom of the oven with a butter knife while I stood behind her and watched because I felt too guilty to do anything else.

Max was curled up next to the remains of the fire. I closed the front door and expected him to look up but he didn't move. I said his name. He didn't move. I said it louder, traversing the sea of bedding that filled the living room.

'Maximum.' I crouched down next to him and shook his shoulder. I noticed there was a pile of clothes next to the fire.

'Max.' Tightness gripped my throat and spread into my chest. No, no, no, no.

'Max *wake up*,' I instructed him. I put my fingers to his throat without much of an idea where his pulse would be anyway. My fingers must have been cold. He flinched, whimpered a little.

'Max, wake up, buddy. It's me. We gotta get moving.'

He whimpered again and opened his eyes, just a slit. I put my hand on his forehead. It was cool, too cool.

'Max did you throw up?'

He shook is head. I sat him up, holding him by his narrow shoulders. He tried to open his eyes more.

'Dude, you need to eat.'

He let out a short breath as if to say *derr*.

'Have you been drinking water?'

He shook his head.

'Man, I told you, there's a whole cup there for today, you've got to.'

Another slight shake of the head. I sighed. I pulled a can of spaghetti from my pocket, opened it and scooped some out with my fingers. He ate it from my hand. I scooped out more and he soon finished the can. Max flopped back onto the mattress but he must have already been feeling better because he lifted his arm and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'I burnt a lot of clothes, Fin. I'm sorry. I couldn't… cut the wood… to put it on the fire. The clothes were… right here.'

'It's okay.'

I opened another can for Max and left it with him to eat while I gathered up the few clothes we had left. I shoved them into garbage

bags and took them out to where I had left Ellen's car in the middle of the street, pointing up the hill. I threw the bags into the boot. I was going to get that car up the hill. There was no choice.

I went back inside and slugged the axe into the dining suite; splinters scattered across the sisal carpet. It took a long time. I didn't have the strength to finish the job, I would have to come back and do the rest. I loaded the wood into the boot along with the coffee table – our last remaining piece of wooden furniture. Shame I couldn't burn the plasma and the iPod dock and our computers. They were of no use to us. Maybe they could be brewed into a fine soup with lots of salt if things got desperate. If things got desperate. Ha.

Max was beginning to rally. There was colour in his face again. I gathered up our bedding and stuffed it into garbage bags. I could hear my mum telling me that I'd fit more in the bags if I folded the blankets.

'Where are we going?' Max asked.

'Up the road. Arnold's place.'

'Who's Arnold?'

'Guy from school. He has food. It makes more sense for us to band together.'

I picked up the last doona. Beneath it was *Pooh and Tigger Fly Kites*. Max and I stared at the book.

'Do you think she's okay?' Max whispered.

'I don't know.' I took the bag out to the car, then came back for Max. I wanted him to lean on me as we went to the car but he wouldn't.

Just like the handbook said, I made sure my passenger and I were both wearing our seatbelts. Then I checked and adjusted my seat position and mirrors. The view out the back window was pretty much obscured by the coffee table. There was nothing I could do about this so I carried on. I started the ignition, put my foot on the brake and put the car into drive. As I let the handbrake off and eased my foot off the brake, I turned the wheel toward the nature strip on the left-hand side of the road and the car crept forward. We hit the lip of the guttering and I pressed the accelerator a fraction, the car let out a high-pitched whine of protest and the back tyres spun on the ice. I tried again and the car nosed up the kerb and onto the nature strip. I drove it gently forward and straightened the wheel so we were parallel with the road. I began driving up the hill slowly. We made it about fifteen metres until the back tyres began to skid again and we started to slide backward ever so slightly.

'Shit, shit, shit.' I smacked the wheel. 'C'mon, *c'mon*.' The car whined its refusal. Why did Mum and Dad have to pick a house at the

bottom of a bloody hill? Why? I pressed the accelerator again. And backward we went. I put on the handbrake and turned to Max. 'Okay, you're going to have to drive. I'll push.' His eyes bulged. I got out of the car.

'I'll talk you through it, yeah?'

Max got in the driver's seat. 'Which one's the accelerator?'

'The one on the right. Put your seatbelt on.'

I went to the back of the car and braced myself against it with my full body weight.

'Okay, put your foot on the brake, on the left, put it into drive, take the handbrake off and gently press the accelerator as you take your foot off the brake.'

The car whined and the tyres flung snow into the air. I pushed and pushed with everything I had, which admittedly wasn't all that much. It wasn't working. All I was doing was preventing the car from sliding backward and even that was questionable.

'Okay, okay, stop. Put the handbrake on.' I turned and leaned on the back of the car taking a minute to get my breath.

'Okay new plan.' I opened the driver's door. Max got out and went back to the passenger seat. I got in and reversed the car onto the road again, so it was pointing down the hill.

'Ready?'

'Hell yes.'

I took the handbrake off and floored it. We sped down the hill and the end of the cul-de-sac came rushing toward us, Max was gripping either side of his seat. The end. Don't brake don't brake don't brake. I spun the wheel to the right and pulled the handbrake on, just like I had seen Matt Damon do. The rear of the car slid out and we were in a cloud of grey, I let the handbrake off and the car launched toward the nature strip, up over the kerb, I turned right just a fraction and the back slid out again and we were facing back up the hill. I pressed down on the accelerator and the engine sang like it quite liked that and using the momentum we roared up the nature strip, through azalea bushes and over at least three tiny Buddha statues. The car kept singing and somehow we gained traction and bounced over people's lawns and driveways. Max let out a whoop as we bounded up the hill. As we got to the top I let the car slow. Max was laughing. We got to the corner and I eased the car gently around, sticking to the nature strip. The car bunted over the grass until we got to Arnold's place.

'Man, next time you *have* to let me have a go,' said Max.

'Yeah right.'

I opened the boot of the car and Arnold came out of the house. He stood looking at the car, frowning.

‘How did you get it up the hill?’

I shrugged but I couldn’t stop grinning.

‘Why didn’t you just put chains on?’

‘Don’t have any, only been to the snow once.’

‘But, Fin, you can use anything, rope, whatever, you just wrap it round the tyres.’ Max laughed. I opened my mouth to reply but nothing came out. Arnold took two bags from the boot and went inside. Despite the laughing, Max still looked pale.

‘Go inside,’ I told him.

‘You are such a tool.’

‘Go sit down.’ I led Max up the front steps. Arnold stood and held the door open for us. ‘Max, this is Arnold. Arnold, this is my brother, Max.’

Arnold nodded to Max. ‘Call me Noll,’ he said. I dumped a garbage bag of clothes in the living room and wondered if I was allowed to call him Noll too.

We drank tea and sat on the mattress Arnold had dragged out in front of the fire for Max. I would take the couch. After eating another can of food, Max fell asleep.

‘So,’ said Noll. ‘Mr Starvos’ shop.’

‘Yeah. He said he was keeping everything in the storeroom.’

‘There’s no guarantee there will be anything left.’

‘No. But I don’t see a whole lot of other options.’

‘It means stealing food that we have no right to.’

‘I know. We wouldn’t take it all.’

‘Have you thought about how we would do it?’

Twenty-two

I would have to do it very quickly. One shot only. I would have to use enough force to get it right the first time. The hammer was in the front pocket of my hoodie and both my hands were shoved in there, too. I wore my hood low over my eyes. I remember seeing a news story on television about how some Neighbourhood Watch groups in London were calling for hoodies to be banned because they provided instant disguise for vandals and hooligans. Did this mean I had become a thug? Lokey would be proud. I put my head down and strode quickly down the street. I neared the corner and rehearsed the action over and over again in my mind, feeling a bit soft for being so nervous. I walked past the supermarket windows, I rounded the corner and as I did I took the hammer from my pocket and rammed it through the pane of glass next to the deadlock on the door. The sound was beautiful, like a peal of bells cracking through the silent streetscape. I put the hammer back in my pocket, put my head down and ran, the soles of my shoes smacking the snow-covered bitumen. I ran all the way around the block until I came back to Noll's house.

Much later, Max went for a walk past the shop. The narrow strip of shattered glass next to the front door had been boarded up with cardboard and duct tape. Too easy.

Twenty-three

Midnight. We were in the living room, nervous as hell. We gazed, quiet, at the last smouldering remains of a dining chair. The rest of the wood from Arnold's house was loaded in the back of the station wagon now, along with a bag of clothes, a heap of bottled water, some bedding and a hose for syphoning fuel. Arnold had also packed other things we thought might come in handy: gaffer tape, rope, a Swiss army knife. Things that almost made us believe that we knew how to survive without the comforts of home. We would leave as soon as the job was done. The Job – as if we were about to rob a friggin' casino.

Noll's forehead was furrowed in concentration. 'I'm still not convinced this is a good idea,' he said.

'It's too easy: we go in, we get the food, we leave.' I was trying to convince myself as much as him.

'It's wrong.'

'I don't see what choice we have. We will starve if we don't do something. Who knows how long it's going to take to find Mum.'

'I still don't like it.'

'Neither do I. But we don't have to like it. If we don't get there first someone else will.'

'Survival of the fittest?'

'Exactly.'

Max liked the plan. He was pumped, sitting, bobbing his head with his hood up like he was friggin' Snoop Dogg or someone. I thought of that cop in our kitchen trying to get our food. We were different to him, weren't we? I had Max to worry about. Starvos would have heaps of stuff in there. Heaps. More than enough.

We were ready to go, dressed in the darkest clothes we had – which seemed kind of dumb, it wasn't like anyone was going to see us. There were no streetlights. I held the Dolphin torch.

'Right,' I said. 'Let's go.'

'Let's go,' Arnold agreed.

I realised that I hadn't been outside at night since the bombs. I hadn't experienced the swallowing blackness. The little light in the car illuminated the yard for a few moments when we opened the doors. Then we shut them and were in the blackness again. I heard the key scraping around next to the steering wheel while Noll fumbled around for the ignition. I opened my door a fraction so the light came back on, he put the key in and started the car. The sound seemed loud enough to wake up the whole street.

'Go, go, go,' I said.

We drove up the street and Noll stopped the car about a hundred

metres from the shop and turned off the ignition and the headlights.

'Noll, I know this is dramatic,' I said. 'But if someone busts us, don't worry about me, get Max out of there.'

I thought maybe he would protest and say something about solidarity and all for one and stuff, but he just nodded.

I propped the Dolphin torch on the dashboard and it shone a thin stream of light onto the road ahead of us, so we could partially see where we were going. Max and I got out of the car.

'Max, this is serious, yeah? Don't do anything dumb. Stick to the plan.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

We began to push. The idea was that without the engine running there was less chance of anyone hearing us. The only sound was our breathing and the soft mulch of ice beneath the tyres. In my imagination it had been a stealthy move but in reality it was bloody hard work and took freaking ages. The soles of our shoes kept slipping on the ice.

We pushed the car along the kerb until we were about fifteen metres away from the shop. Max would stand outside the shop and keep watch. I would go in, get the boxes of cans and pass them to Max, who would run them down to the car. We wouldn't take everything, but we would take as much as we could fit in the boot.

Max and I walked up the street to the shop.

'If someone comes you yell out and then run. Don't wait for me, just run like hell to the car and go.'

'What will you do?'

'I'll deal with it. No one will see us anyway. It'll be cool. You got your torch?'

'In my pocket.'

'Cool.'

We reached the corner and I turned to glance back to where the car was. We stopped at the shop door. I took the Stanley knife from my back pocket and pushed the blade up. Max shielded the torchlight with his hand and concentrated the beam on the cardboard panel by the doorframe. I gripped the knife and plunged the blade into the cardboard. It made a muffled popping sort of noise. Working the blade back and forth I cut a flap in the cardboard, then slid my hand in and felt around for the back of the deadlock. My fingers located the cold ball of the metal switch, I turned it and repeated the process for the bolts at the top and bottom of the door. It was easy. I nodded at Max and went inside.

I swung the beam of the torch around the room and down the mouths of the aisles, illuminating items on the shelves: laundry detergent, soap, razors, garbage bags. I shone it behind the counter to

the doorway that led to what I guessed to be the storeroom. I went in. It was a small room with brick walls and no windows, just like a tomb. There were cartons piled up all over the place. I ran the torchlight over them: copy paper, laundry detergent. Useless. Two-minute noodles. Bingo. I set the torch down on one of the boxes so it threw enough light around the room for me to see my way. I picked up a box and carried it out to the front door. I gave it to Max and he turned and ran with it toward the car and I went back for another box. There didn't seem to be any soup left. More noodles, I took them, they were good because they were light, then I got breakfast cereal, cartons of soy milk, nuts. More noodles. Max said the boot was nearly full. We only had room for a couple more boxes. I got more cereal and ran it out to Max but he wasn't there. He must have been down at the car. I couldn't see his torch and I figured he had probably got the hang of going without it. I put the box down at the doorway and went back into the storeroom. I pushed a box of dog food aside with my foot and found a carton of Weet-Bix. As the box scraped along the concrete I thought I heard a brief shadow of a noise. I froze. I listened to the silence. Waited. Nothing. I turned, crouched down to lift the carton of Weet-Bix and that's when I felt a hand take a fistful of my hair, almost tearing it from my scalp. I didn't have time to yell out. My cheek was smashed against the brick wall and all the breath left me.

I pressed my palms flat against the brickwork and tried to push backward, tried to stop my cheek making such a rough connection with the wall. It didn't really work. The guy was bigger than me. It was the grip of someone well fed. My head was pulled back and slammed once again into the wall and I saw stars, twinkling, dancing stars, which was ironic; I'd wondered when I'd see those again. Then I was still. He didn't pull me back, but left me pressed with my cheek against the wall. I moved my hand back toward my pocket, to the knife. And then I felt a hard object press into the back of my skull.

He yelled at me in a language I didn't understand, but I knew the voice. My nose was filled with the sourness of his sweat and what I guessed to be my blood. Sweat? How could anyone sweat in this cold? Then he brought the gun around and showed it to me. He pressed it into my temple and laughed great wheezing rasps like he'd just told me a joke. He yelled again, moved his fingers down to my neck and jammed the pistol into the base of my skull. I heard him say Max's name.

'Where's Max?' I managed to croak.

He pulled my head back again. He said something.

'I can't understand you,' I moaned. He laughed again and then shoved my face back into the bricks.

'You want your brother? You have your brother when I get my

food back, yes? Or maybe I just kill you. Maybe I eat you!' He laughed again. My cheek slammed once more into the wall. I couldn't feel it any more, only the warmth of my blood on my skin and a creeping tingle up the back of my neck.

'You think you are the first to try this? You think I am not waiting for you?' He drove the muzzle of the gun against my scalp. 'I need to make example of you. I am not—' he pulled my head back, '—charity,' he said and slammed it forward into the bricks.

I was very, very tired. Sleepy. I didn't care if he killed me. I just wanted to go to sleep. I felt my body relax.

I closed my eyes.

I see my mum's face lit by candlelight. She leans over the pirate birthday cake.

'Big breath, Finni! Blow out the candles!'

I am running my thumb over the smooth glob of plastic at the end of the rope on my toboggan. My fingers are pink with the cold.

I am watching the baby sleep. I am not supposed to be in his room but I like to stand next to his cot and watch him breathe. I like him better when he is asleep.

I am lying on my back on the grass looking up at the sky listening to my iPod.

Lucy crosses her ankles in history class.

I am running.

It's his foot that brings me back. A boot to the soft part just below my ribs. I open my eyes and try to take a breath but it's a bit like someone pulling your face out of the water only to shove it under again. He seems furious that I passed out. From where my head is on the ground I can see his boots and hear them snuff over the concrete floor. They are Blundstones, I think, steel-capped things. Fun.

'Wake up, pussy! You think you can take my food? You think I am stupid?' He punctuates his sentences with his foot. Maybe he's not going to shoot me after all. Perhaps he'll just kick me to death. But no, he stops kicking me. I hear a click and I turn my head just a little to look up at him. Starvos is perfectly still, pointing the gun down at my head. I close my eyes and think of God, only I'm not sure what I want Him to do.

And then there is a sharp cracking noise and my last thought before the enormous black weight comes down on me is of a backyard cricket match the last summer Mum and Dad were still together.

It doesn't sound like a gunshot. But then if I've been shot in the head, my perception of these things is probably off.

Twenty-four

I can still smell tobacco and sweat. And the bitter scent of blood, stronger now. Mine?

I don't think I am dead. But I am underneath something very heavy and my lungs hurt too much to breathe and don't seem to have room to expand anyway. I need to find the strength to move my arms and push the weight off me. I try to think about my arms, about where they are. I move my fingers. I am not dead. I cannot move much else though. A breath manages to work its way into my chest and the feeling is like having your diaphragm stabbed with a blunt object. The weight moves, it rocks and I am sure I can hear the sound of someone groaning in effort. The pressure is off my arms a little, I can move my right arm, I can push with it and I do and then cold air finds my face. I gasp and it hurts like hell but the weight is gone and I can see the arches of light on the walls cast by the torch from where I have left it on a box. Two faces come into my line of vision: a man and a girl. They are pooled in shadow; my eyes try to adjust. The expression on the girl's face is of panic, wide eyes. Even in my near-dead stupor I notice they are very nice eyes. My vision blurs. I close my eyes and open them again. Dark indigo beanie pulled low over the ears, big coat and an expression that changes from fear to absolute relief and warmth. She touches my face.

'Fin? Fin. Are you okay?'

She is holding a cricket bat. She drops it to the floor where it lands with a clunk. She crouches down beside me and for a moment I let myself believe that it is her. *Just go with it, Fin, accept a few moments of bliss before you come to your senses*. I close my eyes and open them again. A lock of dark hair falls over her shoulder.

'Lucy?'

She puts her hands on my cheeks, her palms are cool and soft.

'Fin?'

I would laugh, but it hurts too much.

'Holy shit, Fin, he was going to kill you.' She takes her hands from my face and covers her mouth. Next to her, the man is crouched down beside a human mass. The human mass is definitely not moving, definitely not conscious. He is on his back with his face turned to the side.

'Well, I'd say you got 'im, Luce,' says the man. I sit up and a jarring pain rips through my ribs. I touch my fingers to my cheek and they come away wet with blood.

'Is he okay?' she asks.

'He's not dead. He's gonna have the mother of all headaches when

he wakes up.'

Lucy puts my arm around her shoulder and her arm around my waist, the man comes to my other side. Slowly they help me up. The room spins.

'Where's Max? Where's my brother?'

'Was he the young kid?' asks the man. Is he Lucy's dad? He doesn't seem old enough.

I nod.

'Starvos hit him before he came inside for you. There was another guy, a guy in a car?'

'Noll.'

'He came running. We put the kid in the car. I told him to get out of there. I also told this one to stay outside. Instead she comes in swinging a cricket bat.'

We hobble outside. The man stops.

'Go get the gun,' he says to Lucy.

She frowns.

'Pick up the gun. We should keep it.'

The street is an ocean of dark. Lucy and the man steer me across and as we get closer I see light coming from inside Lucy's house further down the street. The flesh on my side feels like it is tearing away from my ribs. We go up Lucy's driveway and then up some stairs. I see a woman standing in the doorway, she is maybe mid-fifties. She sees me and presumably the condition of my face and rushes forward to help me inside. That's the point when I pass out.

Twenty-five

Awake. I think.

The strong, tangy scent of metho. Warmth – a fire. I touch my fingertips to my cheek and feel the papery film that holds cotton wadding to my face. Breathe in. Breathe out. Stabbing, stabbing, stabbing in my side. Hunger. Memory.

'Where's Max?' I don't even know if there's anyone there to answer me. I try to move my head to the side, to see around me but my neck is too stiff. There is blood in my mouth.

'Hello?' Must stop passing out. Waking up again is terrifying.

Footsteps. 'Fin? Fin, you're awake.'

Am I?

'Can you hear me?' Lucy. Her face hovers over me and she examines me like I am a puzzle. I can't help but smile at her.

'Hi.'

She smiles.

'Where is my brother?'

'He's with Noll, remember? More to the point, who is Noll, exactly?'

'Arnold Wong. We kind of teamed up with him.'

'From school? That's random and unexpected.'

'I know.' I try to sit up, but my muscles won't let me.

'You need to stay still,' says Lucy.

'I have to get back to Max.'

'I know, but you need to lie down. Fin, listen to me. You've got concussion, your brain needs to reboot.'

I close my eyes, giving in.

The couch I'm lying on has been padded out with blankets and pillows. Lucy explains to me that her family went to stay with her aunt and uncle further up the mountains not long after the missiles. They figured they were better off sticking together early. She had come back that night with her mum and her uncle to get more food and clothes.

'In the middle of the night?'

'My uncle thought it would be too dangerous in the day – people might try and take our food.' I open one eye and see her arch an eyebrow. 'He was kind of right.'

Lucy sits on the edge of the couch, at my feet. I am mentally preparing to get up and go to Max but every time I lift my head from the pillow I feel like I'm going to vomit. I try to piece together what has happened.

'How did you know I was in there?'

‘I saw the flashlight from my bedroom window. I didn’t know it was you for sure, but I recognised your shape, when you were standing at the door breaking in. Then I saw Starvos come down and hit your brother. That’s when I grabbed my uncle. He wanted me to stay outside but…’ She shrugs. ‘The cricket bat was behind the counter.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome. But know that I’m not going to come save your skinny arse every time you try and rob a crazy guy.’

‘Okay. I’ll stop relying on your cricket skills so heavily.’

‘Appreciate it.’

‘You make a habit of confronting crazy guys with guns?’

‘I try not to. And I’m not sure whacking someone from behind counts as confrontation.’ She pauses. ‘And I don’t know if he’s necessarily a crazy guy. He was just trying to protect what was his.’

It’s what I already know and what I have avoided in my head ever since we came up with this plan. Trying to save yourself and your family isn’t crazy. People will try to hold on when their world starts to tilt, they will grab onto whatever is in reach. Doesn’t matter if it means throwing punches at your neighbour or pointing a gun at someone’s head.

Lucy sighs and tilts her head back, gazing at the ceiling. ‘But he was going to kill you. I’m certain of that much.’

After a while I tell her about Dad and Kara being missing and about Mick and Ellen.

‘I was worried about you, about whether you had enough food and that. I came here looking for you.’

She looks at me for a moment. ‘Did you?’

‘Yeah, of course.’

There is sadness in her smile. ‘I wondered if you would. I didn’t think the snow and the blackout would go on this long.’ She picks lint from the blanket and rolls it into a little ball. ‘Do you know where your mum is?’

I shake my head. ‘But I’m going to find her. She’ll have a better idea of what’s going on. That’s why I was at Arnold’s. We figured we’d band together, find more food and get out of here.’ I tell her about our theory of the government abandoning us and the Ketterleys and my encounter with the army truck.

‘My dad thinks the same about the government,’ Lucy says. ‘He didn’t say anything to us but I heard him talking to Mum.’

There is a knock at the front door. Lucy gets up and takes a look out the window. She goes to the door and I hear a male voice, too quiet to be Starvos come for vengeance. I hobble to the door just in case it is and I’m required to do something manly. Arnold is there in a

big parka with a flashlight and a sceptical look on his face.

'I wanted to check you were alive,' he says.

'I'm alive. Where is Max?'

'My place.'

'Is he okay?'

'He's okay, Fin.'

'Did Starvos hit him? Where? In the head? Did he black out?'

'Pistol-whipped I believe is the term—'

'Bastard!' The guilt I feel about taking Starvos' food dissipates.

'He's okay, Fin,' he says. 'I patched him up. From appearances he got off lighter than you.'

'Starvos was going to kill him,' says Lucy.

'Then Lucy stepped in with a cricket bat,' I explain.

'Really? Is he hurt? Mr Starvos, I mean.'

'Noll, he was going to kill me, he hit Max – a friggin' kid.'

'I understand. I'm just asking.'

'I knocked him out. He's fine, he's rosy,' says Lucy.

'Okay,' Noll said doubtfully. 'Well, I'm going to go back to Max. I don't want to leave him on his own for too long.'

'Thank you,' I say.

'It's nothing.'

We can hear Lucy's mum coming down the hall. She's going to be pissed – in a really polite way – that we're drawing attention to the house.

'You should try and sleep,' Noll says. 'I've parked the car in the garage in case Mr Starvos comes looking for it. We'll leave in the morning.'

My throbbing head feels slightly better on a pillow again. Lucy says goodnight and vanishes down the hallway, presumably to where she is sleeping. I am acutely aware that she is less than twenty metres away from me, under the same roof. And that she saved my life.

In the morning I wake early. I roll onto my side and feel every bruise. It still hurts to breathe. Mrs Tenningworth comes into the room to offer me half a can of spaghetti. She seems to be genuine in offering me food that should rightfully be for her family, but I knock it back. Politely. Food supply won't be an issue for us for a little while.

'Can I have a look at your face?' She gently tilts my head back, the crook of her index finger under my chin. 'What's the plan?' she asks in a casual sort of way, like she's asking me about a camping trip.

Oh, you know, nick off with our stolen food in a dead woman's car and see if we can find anyone else to rip off, the usual.

Instead I tell her about Mum and explain our plan to try to find

her.

'She will know what's going on, what we have to do to… get through this.' I almost say it, the S word: survive. Mrs Tenningworth drops her hand from my chin and pulls back a little, looking at my face like she's assessing it for bits that might fall off.

'Lucy told me about your mother, that she will be able to help. Fin, Lucy likes you…'

'Oh, we're just friends.'

'She thinks you're a decent person and I'm going to trust her on that.'

'Um, thanks.'

'I think you could convince her to go with you.'

I swallow.

'It's not safe here any more. A few nights ago some people invaded a house up the street from where we are staying. Took all the family's food. We don't have much left anyway. And I'm pretty sure that it's going to become impossible to keep us all… alive. We don't have enough fuel to make it into the city, but…' There are tears brimming in her eyes as she clears her throat and sits up a little straighter. 'This is an opportunity and I think I would regret it later if I didn't… If I didn't send her with you. Her sister would never agree, but Lucy… you could convince her, Fin. Try, won't you?'

Mrs Tenningworth stands up, placing her hand briefly on my shoulder before she leaves the room.

Lucy wanders in while I am folding my blankets. Her hair is wound into a messy knot behind her left ear, fastened with a clip in the shape of a squirrel. As she takes the blankets from me I notice that she smells faintly of vanilla and coconut. I am wearing the same hoodie that I have been for the last two weeks and my left cheek is held together with tape.

'Well?' she asks. 'Nightmares about large, hairy men and instant noodles?'

'A few. You?'

'No. Only cricket bats.' She sits on the couch, brings her feet up and tucks them under her. She has the posture of a ballet dancer. 'So…'

'So… terrible weather.'

'Don't be such a downer.'

'At least we never had to do that history assignment.'

'I worked my arse off for that history assignment! Total waste of time.'

I wish Lucy hadn't mentioned her arse. 'I know,' I reply weakly.

She sighs. 'It's not fair, Fin. We won't get to do all the things we

should.'

'Like what?'

'Like have awkward phone conversations, go to the movies, make out in cars, have fights.'

'You think we would fight?'

'I don't know. Isn't that what people do?'

'I wouldn't fight with you if you were willing to make out with me in a car.'

Silence. Oh shit. Too far. I thought she was talking about me and she wasn't and, oh shit, now my ears are on fire. I glance at her. She is looking at me, she looks very serious. Stuff it. I lean over and gently place my hand on the side of her neck, my thumb on her cheek and she closes her eyes and I kiss her. My chest feels like it's going to explode. We kiss and then stop, breathe, and she puts her hand on mine and looks at me but doesn't smile.

'Come with us,' I say.

'I can't leave my family, my sister.'

'She can come too.'

'But my parents…'

'They want you to get out, Luce. My mum will be able to help us. It's… I think it's your only chance.'

She puts her head in her hands. My anger at the world coils inside of me. It's a directionless seething, there's no name or face to aim at. I want to be the guy who has an ingenious plan, something to offer her. But I am utterly helpless. With her eyes still closed she beats at the lounge with a fist, harder and harder. Then she opens her eyes and looks up at the ceiling and I see a tear slide down her cheek.

'Stuff it,' she whispers. 'I'll come with you.'

Twenty-six

I leave her and walk the short distance back to Noll's house. I open the door and Max is standing there. The skin around his left eye is plum-coloured and swollen. He gives me his trademark killer smile.

'Check it out, man!'

I grab him and hug him, holding on as if I'm afraid he'll float away.

Noll comes to the door. I tell him Lucy will be coming with us.

'That's good. The more there are of us the better, I think.'

'Did Max sleep?' I ask.

'He did. I stayed up and kept an eye on him for a while. I wanted to stay up all night, just to be sure he was okay. But I couldn't, I fell asleep. I'm sorry.'

'You were going to stay up all night to look out for my brother?'

'You asked me to take care of him.'

'Yeah, but… Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

'The car is ready to go? All the food still in it?'

'Yes.' Noll looks like he wants to say something more.

'What's wrong?'

'Did you leave enough food there for Mr Starvos and his family?'

'We didn't take it all. There was still a bit… I think. He was going to kill me, Noll. He told me he was going to kill me.'

He nods. 'How badly was he hurt? Do you think he would have woken up?'

'I don't know. I don't see what choice we had. Lucy… Noll, she saved my life. He was going to kill me.'

'I understand. We should go.'

Lucy takes a bag from off the top of her wardrobe and I sit on the edge of her bed. The room feels like a relic, a memory. The walls are crammed with photos, pictures torn from magazines, movie and band posters. There is a huge Radiohead poster at the head of the bed and another framed picture of Pablo Picasso holding a pistol.

Mrs Tenningworth comes into the room with an ice-cream container.

'First-aid kit,' she says. 'Bandages, antiseptic cream, painkillers.' She disappears down the hall and returns with a plastic lunchbox full of cutlery.

'Mum, I'm pretty sure we won't be having dinner parties.'

Mrs Tenningworth puts it in the bag and then looks through what Lucy has packed.

‘How many pairs of socks do you have? You need more than that, here…’ She opens a drawer. Lucy softly places a hand on her shoulder.

‘Mum—’

‘Where’s your red cardigan? I only got that for you six months ago.’

‘Mum.’

‘What? I’m your mother…’ She is crying. ‘I’m your mother and I’m supposed to let you go out there… because I can’t do anything else. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, my darling. I can’t do anything else.’ She pulls Lucy to her and I look away to give them space.

‘Fin, you must look after each other,’ Mrs Tenningworth says to me. ‘You must.’

Noll has parked the car on the street. He and Max wait while I carry Lucy’s bag from the house. Lucy’s uncle pulls me aside on the front porch. He holds out his hand. In it is Starvos’ gun. I take it from him. It’s the first time I’ve ever held a gun and it’s heavier than I expected. Lucy comes out of the house, stopping when she sees the gun. She looks at her uncle, he says nothing, just nods his head. I reach around and tuck it into the band at the back of my jeans like I have seen dudes do on television. I hope the action comes across fluid and natural, like I am used to doing hardcore things with weapons all the time. I have to regain some dignity after having my arse saved by a chick with a cricket bat. It does make her a bit Lara Croft though, and I don’t mind that.

I carry the bags to the car and Lucy says her goodbyes. I don’t watch. I can’t imagine leaving Max behind, it would be like cutting off my own arm, tearing it off.

As I squash Lucy’s bag into the back of the station wagon, I feel the gun press into my hip. Lucy walks down the drive to the car, hugging herself against the cold. She looks up and her eyes are red and teary, but there is stubborn determination in her expression.

‘Are you ready?’

She nods.

I glance to the front seat, to Noll. He is very still, eyes downcast.

‘Are you okay with us bringing the gun?’ I ask Lucy quietly.

She frowns. ‘Are *you* okay with it?’

‘I don’t know. I… I’m thinking about Noll, I guess. He’s worried about Starvos and what we’ve done. I don’t think he’ll want to keep it, but I think we’ll be safer with it.’

‘Let’s just go. I need to go.’

I open the back door for her. She gets in and slides across to the other side. I get in next to her. There is one seat left.

‘Can we make a detour?’ I ask.

Twenty-seven

As we drive through the streets of our town, toward the highway, we are silent.

I haven't been beyond Noll's house for three months. The road is a wide strip of dirty snow. Houses stare out at it from beneath their cloaks of grimy ice. People's gardens have died. The front of each house is populated with wiry skeletons reaching up for a sun that isn't there. We wind through streets that all look the same. There are some tyre tracks on the road but not many. As we get closer to the highway we see a group of people standing out on the street, they are the first people we've seen and they are looking at something. As we approach, Noll slows down. On the right-hand side of the road are the charred remains of a house, black and stark against the snow, steam rising from it. I know Noll wants to stop, I want to stop, but as we approach the people turn their faces toward us, they stare out from under the hoods of their coats. I can't make out how old they might be. Their eyes are cold and desperate, cheeks sunken, skin grey. They look like the walking dead. Noll keeps driving and it occurs to me we probably look no different. I turn and watch them out the rear window. They have turned their attention back to the house and stand motionless, like mourners at a gravesite.

We turn onto the highway and head east, down the mountains toward the city. I give Noll directions and he takes a left turn off the highway. We follow the street for a few hundred metres and I tell him to pull over outside a small weatherboard cottage. There are no cars in the driveway and I know there's not really any point seeing if anyone is home, but I get out and walk up the front path anyway. The front yard is as familiar to me as my own. Beside the path, the broken trampoline I have spent hours on sags beneath the weight of melting snow. I go up the three steps to the front door and knock loudly.

'Hello? Lokey?'

I wait. Nothing.

I try again, but if he is still alive he is not here.

We drive back to the highway. We pass the ghosts of the library and McDonald's and as we come into the next town I disturb the pool of silence by suggesting we go past the supermarket. Noll catches my eye in the rear-view mirror and I shrug.

'You never know.'

We pull into the empty car park. Noll slows as we drive past the supermarket entrance. There is a space where the sliding glass doors should be. Snow has drifted in over the shiny lino floors. Noll stops the car and I get out, Lucy follows. Max opens his door.

‘Stay.’

‘C’mon—’

‘Stay,’ I bark. He gives me the finger and I return it.

The shelves are bare. There are a few items abandoned in the middle of the deserted aisles: a mop, some rolls of paper towel, shampoo bottles, a packet of nappies. Nothing we can use. Most of the registers at the checkouts have been smashed, their computer monitors lying on the floor. We head back out to the car at the same time three guys come around the corner of the building. They see us and approach, not looking like they are after casual conversation. They have the same desperate look as the people we saw earlier and, as they get closer, I see that they aren’t that much older than us. I think one of them used to go to our school. Lucy and I quicken our pace.

‘Oi,’ yells the biggest one. They make it to the car before we do. I silently curse myself for not hiding the food better in the back – it’s blatantly obvious through the windows. One of them stands in front of the back door, we move to go to the other side but the biggest one blocks us.

‘Give us your food,’ he says.

‘Back off,’ says Lucy.

The big guy smiles. ‘Stay out of this, sweetheart,’ he says and I can actually see the moment when Lucy notes that the guy is way bigger than her and decides she doesn’t give a crap.

‘Who the hell are you calling sweetheart? You think you can just take our stuff?’ she says.

‘Yeah, I do.’ He thumps the driver’s window. ‘Open up!’

I pull open my coat and lift the edge of my hoodie. I point to the gun tucked into the band of my jeans, trying to make out like I’m used to making hardcore gangsta-style threats. ‘Piss off, yeah?’

He puts his palms up, backs away from the car. The others do the same. Lucy and I get in.

Noll accelerates. I can see Max gripping the upholstery of the front seat, his face is white.

‘What did you say to them?’ Noll asks.

‘I said Lucy had tuberculosis and was highly contagious.’

‘They fell for that easy.’ Noll looks at me in the mirror. I shrug. He drops it, but I don’t think we have convinced him. We leave the car park and turn back onto the highway at an intersection where traffic lights stand like monuments to some past era. Noll keeps to the left of the highway even though there’s no one on it and no cops to tell him otherwise. The light is fading and I know we won’t get far before nightfall.

Twenty-eight

Driving in the dark, you can almost pretend that nothing has happened, that the world is the way it was before and you're not running. There is nothing on either side of the car, just black, and we follow the cold light thrown before us by the headlights of a dead woman's car. The lines on the road are lost beneath the ice and slurry and there is nothing to guide us. Noll loses the road and noses the car up an embankment. We are going so slowly that no one screams, not even Max. Instead we are just irritated – cold, hungry and irritated.

Noll tries to back the car up, but all it does is whine. We sit in silence for a moment, then Noll heaves his door open and gets out. Beside me, Lucy sighs and tilts her head back, looking to the roof for guidance, or strength, or maybe she's just sick of looking at the dark. I get out of the car.

Noll kicks at the snow around the front tyre. I get a shovel from the back of the car and start to dig.

'You think we've got enough petrol to make it to the city?' I ask.

'I don't know. We've got a quarter of a tank but I've got no idea how much it takes to get there. Do you?'

'No idea… Want me to drive for a bit?'

'Yes.'

We get back in and I put the car in reverse and roll back onto the road. We begin again. I don't know why, but in my head I can see Mr Effrez. He is sitting at his desk in my old English classroom. The windows are gone and there's snow over all the desks. He sits in the dark, stroking his beard, thinking. But my imagination is wrong, inaccurate, because in the picture there is a moon up in the sky.

I don't know how long we've been driving on the freeway. It runs from the mountains, across the plains to the city – a drive we've all done countless times before and even though it's dark now, the scenery is tattooed in my memory. Suburbs sprawl out from it on either side, huge urban mazes that merge into mini-cities themselves: housing estates with cul-de-sacs, sporting fields and shopping centres. I imagine everything covered with grey snow, like sheet-covered furniture in a big, vacant house. Maybe we've been driving an hour, maybe two. It's a trip that used to take an hour, but at the pace we're going I feel it's going to take at least four.

We pass the cheerful sign that welcomes us to the city of Sydney and marks the beginning of the western suburbs. Maybe we will meet a sort of station where there'll be cans of food and people with clipboards checking off names. I will give them my name and they'll smile and lead me to where my dad is sitting with a cup of tea and a

Milk Arrowroot. That's not going to happen. I know that's not going to happen.

When the headlights catch a sign that says 'State Emergency Service Information Centre' and points to the middle of the road we all lean forward slightly in our seats, craning to see further ahead. Then a line of orange witches' hats appears in front of us, I brake, swerving to the left. The car slides on the ice and this time Max screams. I spin the wheel and manage to pull up just before we hit a parked car. Most of the witches' hats come off second best.

'Thank you, *Need for Speed*,' I say, feeling the thud of my pulse in my temples.

Ahead, a demountable building is illuminated by our headlights. It stands in the centre of the freeway, where the grassy median strip once was. There are two cars parked next to the demountable, but no light coming from the building. We get out of the car. Our feet crunch on the snow and the hinges of the car doors squeal through the silence when we close them. Max, Noll and I look at the building but don't approach it. Lucy flicks her torch on and doesn't hesitate.

'Luce, wait.'

I follow her. She shines the torch at the cars. They are both covered with snow and have broken windows. We head for the steps and see that the door is hanging open. Lucy shines the torch into the black. The whole thing feels like a scene from a Cohen brothers movie. There's a couple of plastic chairs and a two-legged wooden desk. A map of Sydney and the Greater West clings to the wall, pierced crookedly into place with thumbtacks. It is marked and divided by red, hand-drawn lines. Below it, on the ground, is a puddle of snow partially covering what looks like a big burn mark on the lino floor. We look up at the ceiling, and there's a hole, a makeshift chimney. There is nothing else in the place – the official-looking people must have eaten all the Milk Arrowroots, burnt their clipboards and fled.

Outside, Noll is peering through the broken windows of the parked cars. 'Someone's already got to the fuel,' he says before I can ask.

We head toward our car, but I'm soon aware that Max isn't beside me. I turn around and can make out his shape in the black, still lingering by the mouth of the demountable.

'Max, there's nothing here man, c'mon.'

He doesn't move, the others both have the torches and keep walking. I turn and head back toward Max, feeling through my pockets for a lighter. When I find one I flick it and the flame makes a fragile, wobbly light between us.

'You okay?' I can see the wet on his cheeks glint in the light.

‘I thought it would all be alright, I thought there would be people here and they’d know what we’re supposed to be doing and we’d find Dad—’

‘Maximum, look at me. I’m here. I’m here with you. I’m going to get you through this, okay? We’ve got Noll and Lucy. We’re not alone, you’re not alone.’

He shakes his head and the tears keep coming. He looks so small in his beanie and mittens, snot leaking onto his top lip.

‘Hey, hey. You remember those bad bushfires in Victoria? Black Saturday? I read a story about about a guy and his wife who were stranded in the fire. No way out. They had three little kids with them and they all hid with wet blankets over them in this gap between a brick wall and a water tank. The guy said the fear, the panic, was like a heavy medicine ball that he and his wife passed between them – when one panicked the other one would be calm and rational. They survived by taking it in turns. I can hold the ball for you, Max. I’ve got it. I’ve got you.’

He wipes the snot with his sleeve.

‘Stay cool, Max.’

The corner of his mouth twitches and I can see he’s tempted to make the obvious joke.

‘Let’s go back to the car. We gotta keep going.’

He nods and we trudge through the snow. I can’t help wondering when I’m going to drop the ball, though, and who’s going to catch it for me.

We are all back in the car, about to leave, when Lucy opens her door again.

‘Wait a sec,’ she says over her shoulder and jogs back to the demountable. Moments later she gets back in the car, holding the map. I put the car into drive and we start again, carving our way into the dark.

Pools of white light from the headlights on the snow in front and beside us. Black everywhere else. The lights catch the shadowy shapes of cars abandoned by the side of the road. I get careless with the accelerator and the car slides on the ice.

‘Easy, Fin,’ says Noll. ‘We haven’t come this far to die in a car accident.’ Just as he speaks the headlights fall on the body of a car just ahead of us, it lies upside down like a beetle on its back, charred and twisted. I brake and we slide to a halt.

‘Well, that’s encouraging,’ mutters Lucy.

It becomes harder and harder to tell what is road and what is not. I end up waywardly heading for the edge too many times. Lucy takes over driving for a bit, but she has the same problem. A collective decision is made to stop and sleep in the car and continue driving in

the morning.

I don't know what it is that wakes me but when I open my eyes there is a guy striding toward the car with a brick in his hand. Like he's going to use it in a way it wasn't intended for. Like smashing a window.

'Shit! Shit!'

Lucy wakes just as the house brick collides with my window. It's obvious the brick-wielding bloke hasn't eaten properly for a while, the glass cracks, doesn't break. Lucy's fast, I'll give her that, she has started the ignition before I've had a chance to find the gun under the seat. She hits the accelerator in the same instant that the brick connects with the window again, more successfully this time. I'm showered with thousands of tiny glass prisms. The ice and snow hardly make for a quick getaway and the guy is quicker than the car. His gloved hand gets a grip on the window edge. Lucy screams and swerves the car, maybe intentionally to try to throw him off. But the tyres hit a mound of snow and we stop. The guy grabs me by the neck and shoulder and hauls himself halfway in the window. Max is screaming now, too. The grip on my throat doesn't allow for much from me. I am madly gouging at the guy's face when I see a hand clamp the back of his neck and a fist smash his nose. Noll is leaning through the gap between the front seats, he punches the guy again. My throat is released and I gulp air. Lucy's scream has become a screech. The guy goes limp and his bloody face falls on my chest.

'Arrrgh! Arrrgh!' I'm like a girl with a dead rat. I push his head, his arm and get him out of the window. His body slumps in the snow next to the car.

I'm covered in blood. Lucy has her hands over her mouth and her eyes closed. In the back, Noll sits eyes wide, labouring to catch his breath. His hands are held up, chest height, shaking, right glove dark with blood. Max is crying. My throat aches from the guy's grip.

'Are you okay?' Lucy asks.

'Yeah,' I manage.

Noll opens his door, pulls off his gloves and throws them out. Then he leans out and vomits into the snow. Lucy gets out and crouches next to him, giving him a bottle of water. In the back Max is snivelling, furiously wiping at his tears.

'Maximum. I'm okay.'

He nods.

'You okay?'

He shakes his head. I smile at him.

'Yeah, you are. You gonna be sick?'

Another shake of the head.

‘Yeah, you are.’
He opens his door just in time.
Noll hands Max the water and Lucy gets back in the car.
‘Should have used those moves at school, Noll,’ I say.
He gives a tight smile.

Twenty-nine

We drive and drive. It's stupidly slow, but there are track marks through the slush and I find that comforting. Then another demountable building by the side of the road. Lucy pulls the car over. I see movement through the window of the demountable. A sign of life. I get out, open the boot of the station wagon and cover the food with blankets. Max opens his door.

'I want you to stay here,' I say.

'I can handle it!'

'You're staying here.'

He rolls his eyes. Noll and Lucy get out of the car and we make our way to the building. Footprints have muddied the snow at the doorway, but there is no sound from behind the closed door. I raise a fist and knock. The three of us wait; Lucy and Noll look as nervous as I feel. At first there is nothing but the sound of our own breathing, then a loud cough and movement, voices. The door opens. A face, skull-like. He peers out at us. Behind him on the floor are bundled shapes which I take to be people.

'No room in here,' he says. Then he notices Lucy, he looks her up and down in a way which makes me want to hit him. 'You can come in. We got some food, could have a little trade.'

I open my mouth to abuse the guy, but Lucy gets there first.

'What did you say?' She narrows her eyes.

'I'm kidding, I'm kidding.'

Several others, all men, crowd behind him and peer out the door at us. The three of us back up a bit and I'm already calculating the length of time it will take to run to the car.

'Go back,' I say to her. She hesitates for a moment and I sense that she'd rather stay and kick the guy in the nuts instead. 'Please, Luce.'

'I'm not doing that.'

'She can come in 'ere with us, can't ya gorgeous,' growls the skull.

She steps forward, chin raised, and my breath catches in the back of my throat.

'Shut. The. Fuck. Up,' she hisses at him. 'One question. Is there a Greg Heath here?'

I already know the answer. 'Lucy, leave it.'

'I dunno, sweetheart. Why don ya come inside and have a look?'

He begins to come down the stairs. The others follow. They're all bigger than us, but don't look as well fed.

'Come on, sugar. Just for a little while, you might like it!'

'Run,' I say under my breath. I grab her hand and the three of us

bolt for the car. Lucy loses her footing in the slush. One of the men lunges at her, but I haul her up and away. We make it to the car, where Max, seeing what has happened, has opened all the doors ready for us. The men give up, staggering to a stop, they shout names at Lucy, sick, stomach-churning things. She looks straight ahead and accelerates away.

'We're going to be safer in the city – that's the theory, yes?' she asks me.

'That's the theory.'

'Excellent,' she says. 'I look forward to it.'

Another evening approaches and the sky darkens. Flakes of snow drift and quiver in the beam of the headlights. Then, up ahead, the red glint of tail-lights, a row of parked cars. We slow to a stop. Ahead, in front of the cars, is a razor-wire fence stretched across the freeway. There are barricades and 'road closed' signs. The fence is about nine feet tall. Lucy opens her door a fraction so the internal light turns on. She pulls out the maps and unfolds it across the steering wheel.

'Where are we exactly?' she asks.

'Um… maps aren't really my strong point.'

'Shame. Me neither. Noll?'

Noll leans through the middle. He runs his finger along the thick black line that indicates the highway. He stops at a point struck through with felt pen, a red line that curves across the map, bisecting the outer west of Sydney from the inner.

'What the hell?' asks Lucy.

Noll slumps back in his seat. 'Battery, Lucy,' he says. She sighs and closes the car door, the light goes out.

As discreetly as I can I reach under the seat for the gun, hoping Noll doesn't see it in the dark. I tuck it into my jeans. I take the torch and get out, head toward the barricade. There is a sign but I need to get closer to read it. As I near the fence it becomes clear that the cars aren't neatly stopped in front of the barricade, but have made an effort to drive straight through. The torchlight glints and spider-webs across the cracked windscreens and as I get closer I see the sides of the cars are gouged with small holes. Bullet holes? They can't be. I stop. I look closer. I've never seen bullet holes before, not in real life. Why would they shoot at the cars? I shine the torchlight through the windows of the car closest to me. I see the dark stains across the seats, splatters across the dashboard.

I can't breathe. The ground seems to tilt and I crouch down low. My hands and face and the back of my neck sting with heat as though slapped and I am aware that my skin is damp with sweat. I try to take big gulps of air. I pull at the fingertips of my gloves and yank my

hands free. I plunge my palms into the snow, in the torchlight it glitters silver. It feels cleansing and I want to rub it over my face. I breathe and I work my hands down through the snow until they meet the bitumen. I stay there, head down, eyes closed, palms on the ground.

'Fin? Where are you? I can't see you!' It's my mum and I'm crouching behind a big rock in the picnic area of the national park. I love to hide from her like this because she goes mental.

'Fin?' It's Lucy. I open my eyes, stand slowly and let her know that I'm okay. I steady myself against the door of one of the cars and avoid looking inside. I move closer to the sign to read it. *Residents only past this point. Residents must proceed to checkpoint and have proof of identity and residential address ready.* An arrow points to the left, to the very edge of the freeway. I head along the fence toward it, weaving through the cars. I am almost at the edge of the road when a white pool of light catches me and a voice booms. The shock of it is like a shove to the chest.

'Stay where you are! Put yer hands on yer head!'

I do as I'm told.

Max yells out and I will him to shut up and run.

'Get down on the ground.'

I lower myself to my knees and when I am behind the cover of the cars I slide the gun across the ice, under a car. I put my cheek against the snow and wait while footsteps approach.

The four of us are lined up against the fence, backs to the wire. It's weirdly comforting to come across someone who acts as if they know what they are doing and are under instructions from… somewhere. The guy who stands in front of us wears an army uniform and is carrying an assault rifle half his size. He wouldn't look so threatening if it weren't for the gun. He's no bigger than me or Noll. I don't point this out to him though. Instead, I stand next to the others with my hands on my head, like we're playing some twisted game of Simon Says. He pats us down. He wants to know our names. We tell him. Max's chin quivers a bit but he lifts his head high.

'What are yez doin' here?' the army guy demands.

'Trying to get home,' Lucy answers evenly. 'Could you kindly tell us why the road's blocked?'

He shines the torch in our eyes and we squint and shift, anything we say is going to sound suss. I can't see him in the glare. It's like talking to a disembodied voice.

'We were staying in the mountains with friends,' says Lucy. 'We thought our parents would come and get us. They didn't. We're going home to find them. Why is this part of the city blocked off?'

‘Part of the emergency response strategy. People have to stay at their place of residence so we can keep account of everyone.’

‘So you can keep count of the people who have starved to death, you mean,’ I say.

He ignores me. ‘Residents only beyond this point.’

‘We’re residents,’ Lucy says.

‘I need to see ID and proof of address.’

‘Dude,’ I say. ‘We’ve been staying with friends in the mountains. We’re not exactly carrying passports.’

‘Driver’s licence?’

‘I don’t have a driver’s licence.’

‘Oh yeah, how’d yer get here?’ I feel like I’m ten and being interrogated by the babysitter.

‘Give us a break,’ says Lucy. ‘We drove. There is no food, there have been no instructions, you know that. Please just let us go home.’

‘Can’t let yez through without proper documentation.’

‘What the hell?’ I say. ‘Mate, where have you been the last three months? We don’t have documentation. What do you want us to do? Order birth certificates?’

‘We’re *children* and you have to let us get back to our parents,’ Lucy says.

‘Tell us where your parents are and I’ll get ’em to come and collect you. Otherwise, go back to where you came from.’

‘What are you going to do? Phone them?’

The army guy laughs. ‘We have access to enough back-up power to last us a year.’

‘Oh yeah? I think now’s the time to bring it out.’ Lucy steps out of the line-up as if to walk away. The guy grabs her arm and I lurch forward.

‘Don’t you touch her! Don’t you fucking touch her!’

‘Hands on yer head!’ He shoves Lucy back against the fence and in the same instant draws his weapon on us.

‘Fin, Luce, shut up.’ It’s the first time Noll has spoken. Without the light in our eyes we can see the army guy’s face and the slight quiver in his hands as he grips the weapon. Noll speaks to him like they are the only adults in the conversation.

‘Please, we don’t mean to be difficult. If you want proof, we’ll get it. Let us go back where we came from. Please.’

The officer weighs it up, then lowers the rifle. ‘If yez come back here without ID, all your food supplies and your vehicle will be confiscated.’

‘We don’t have any food,’ I reply.

‘Bull. I can tell just from looking at you.’

‘We won’t come back without ID,’ says Noll.

‘Don’t.’

We head back to the car, the spotlight on our backs.

‘Bit of advice,’ the guy calls after us. ‘Keep movin’, the people round here will smell your food. Yez won’t last five minutes.’

In the car we are quiet. I start the engine and we slide back into the night. After a while Noll asks Lucy for the map.

‘We were right,’ he says. ‘They’re trying to keep people contained and controlled. There’s limited resources for limited people.’

‘They’re feeding the people on that side of the barricade,’ Lucy says. ‘Keeping everyone else out. Which leaves us with a significant problem.’

‘We need a plan,’ says Noll.

‘What are we gonna do?’ asks Max.

‘We’re going to make a plan,’ I say.

‘So, the plan is to make a plan,’ Max says.

‘Yes, Max, that’s the plan.’

He laughs and I love him for it.

We drive slowly back in the direction we came from. Eventually we reach an exit and we creep into the back streets of suburbia, looking for a place we can stop and not be noticed.

My head is wedged in the small space between the side of the headrest and the driver’s side window. It is my attempt to find a comfy sleeping position; driver’s seats aren’t really designed to encourage sleep. There’s a reason for that, I guess. We have locked the doors and Lucy has made an attempt at ‘fixing’ the broken window by covering it in plastic and gaffer tape. As I slosh around in my semi-consciousness I am grateful for the gun in my back pocket.

My eyes snap open.

The gun.

‘Lucy,’ I whisper. She whimpers and in the dark I can’t tell if she’s awake or not.

‘Lucy?’

‘Yeah?’

I listen to hear if Noll has woken up, if he has, he isn’t making any noise.

‘Luce, I’ve left the, the, you know. I’ve left it behind.’

‘The *gun*?’

‘Yeah, I had to lose it before they got to us at the barricade. It’s under one of the cars.’

‘Oh crap.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Take Noll with you.’

‘There’s no way he’s going to want to go back to get a gun. He wouldn’t want us to have it in the first place.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘There’s no time to talk him into it now, anyway. I have to get back before light or they’ll see me.’

‘Fin, no. It’s not safe.’

‘It’d be safer if I had the gun.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No way. Stay here.’

She grips my hand. ‘We’ll wait for you.’

‘You bloody well better. Lock the door after me.’

She doesn’t say anything. I hear her swallow and she keeps hold of my hand for a minute. Then she lets it go and I step out of the car into the cold.

I keep the torchlight low at my feet when I can and I listen like I’ve never listened before, there is nothing but my footsteps, my breath and I swear I can hear my heartbeat. The snow isn’t deep underfoot, but walking is harder than it would be if I’d had a normal diet over the last three months. I find the freeway again and I follow the beam of the torch along it, into the black. My limbs feel weighted and I’m not dressed for this, even though I’m wearing five layers of clothing. I wonder if it is possible to freeze your arse off, literally. If it is, I’m a prime candidate. I try to move quicker.

I flash the torch up ahead, quickly so I don’t draw attention. It catches a flicker of a tail-light. I turn the torch off and head in what I hope is a straight line. A hint of morning has begun to show through the edges of the dark, I can just make out the shapes of the cars up ahead. I try to remember where we stopped the car when we got here, I retrace my footsteps, keeping low to the ground. Every move I make, every breath and heartbeat feels loud and clumsy. With another quick flash of the torch I catch a glimpse of the sign on the barrier and am able to orientate myself. I move through the cars. When I reach the spot where I think I stowed the gun I have to lie on my stomach to scan under the car with the torch. No gun. I check under the next car, and the next. Nothing. Maybe I came from the wrong angle.

I back up a little and then I feel a hand on my shoulder. Maybe it’s the lack of sleep or maybe it’s a lesson I learnt from my encounter with Starvos, but I don’t flinch or startle, instead I turn and throw a punch into the dark and my knuckles connect with a jaw. Its owner lets out an ‘ooof’ sort of noise and in the second when I’m deciding which direction to sprint, he rushes at me and tackles me onto the ice. I try to shove him off, I take another swing but I can’t see what I’m aiming at, we tumble around and I manage to grab hold of his ear. I yank his head back and try to get him off me. It works. I scramble to

my feet but he grabs me by the ankle and pulls me down, my head hits the ice via a car bonnet. And then he's on my back.

'Put your hands behind yer head!' he yells. I can't shift him as he has me pinned. I do as he tells me. He brings my hands down behind my back and cuffs my wrists with plastic tape – the same stuff they use to anchor toys in their packaging. He yanks me to my feet and flicks a torchlight on. I turn to look at him and recognise him as the same guy from before.

'What are you doing?' I ask. 'You can't arrest me, man.'

'I told yer not to come back here. I tried to fucking tell yer.' He starts to march me back to the barrier. We reach the embankment next to the road and I stop moving my feet, I let myself drop and he has to try to keep me upright. He's shorter than me and can't quite manage it.

'Walk!'

'No, I think I'll just rest for a bit.'

'Walk!'

'What's your name?' I ask, like we're sharing a bus seat or something.

'Walk!'

'I'm Fin. Oh, you already know that, hey? I have a younger brother, he's twelve. Haven't seen my parents for almost four months, so I'm pretty sure they're dead.'

'Shut up. Get on yer feet.'

'I'm supposed to be halfway through year twelve. How old are you? How long you been in the army?'

'Shut up.' He tries to get me to stand up but I throw myself to the ground and roll onto my back. In one swift movement he drops the torch into the snow, takes the rifle from his shoulder and points it in my face. Twice in two days, that's really something.

'I will shoot yer.' It's like he's trying to convince himself as well.

'Where's your family?' I ask, super polite.

Morning light creeps into the sky and I can see his breath heaving in and out. He cocks his head to the side.

'Out west. Get up.'

'Just sit down for a minute, mate. Take a load off. I'm not goin' anywhere.' I manage to work my way into a sitting position. 'They have a farm?'

'I tried to tell yer, man. I fuckin' tried. I'm not responsible for this, for what will happen to yer. I tried. Get up.'

'Seriously, dude, what's going on here?'

'WE NEED TO KEEP EVERYONE WHERE THEY BELONG SO WE CAN ACCOUNT FOR THEM!'

'This is about numbers? Account keeping? You're kidding

yourself, you know that, right? Does it work the other way? You got people from over there trying to get over here?'

'Get up.'

The muzzle of the rifle has wandered from my head. He's still looking at me though.

'Hungry? I've got a Mars Bar in my back pocket.' I can reach it with my hands behind my back, I kind of fling it onto the snow next to me.

'You got a mean tackle, man. Rugby?'

'League,' he mutters.

'Yeah, none of that private school bullshit. Seriously, eat it. Sit down.'

He drops his arse to the snow, his jaw is rigid, defiant, but he picks up the Mars Bar.

'Yer don't know nothin',' he says. 'These are good people, these blokes. I follow their orders: I eat when they tell me, I shit when they tell me. Yer don't do that for nothin'. There are reasons for this.'

'Yeah? What are they?'

'We can only do so much at a time. We gotta keep the area secure before they roll out phase two.'

'Which is where picking people off at the barrier comes in?' I speak softly, not wanting to aggravate him. I have to convince him we're on the same side in more ways than one. He doesn't reply.

'They feeding you much?'

'We have rations. Why do yer think I'm still fucking doin' this?'

He shoves the rest of the chocolate bar in his mouth and chews.

'You know, they've abandoned everyone on this side of the barricade. No more rations, we've been left to starve.'

'Bullshit.'

'Dude, why do you think people are willing to get shot trying to get to the other side? That's why we left; it's the only chance we've got.'

He gives me a sideways glance, still chewing.

'Have you heard from your family recently?'

'Yer don't know shit about my family.'

'No, I don't. But, all I mean is, if they're out west they're going to be in the exact same position.'

He doesn't respond to that, just sits, arms slung over his knees, looking out into the distance.

'Yer don't need to risk getting shot at to get through,' he says after a bit. 'All you need is some booze. Or smokes.' Then he takes a switchblade from his pocket, grabs my wrists and slices through the plastic tie. He wipes his sleeve across his mouth and stands up. I can see his eyes now. He looks maybe twenty at the most.

‘Piss off outta here,’ he says and begins to walk away.

‘Wait! I left something around here. You haven’t found… something, have you?’

He doesn’t say anything, but he stops.

‘C’mon man, you know what it’s like out here. We don’t have a chance without it.’

He takes the handgun from under his jacket and chucks it at my feet. He stands watching, rifle in his hands, as I pick up the handgun and get to my feet. When I walk away I can feel his eyes on my back and I know his finger is on the trigger.

They are awake when I get back to the car. I catch Lucy’s eye, she has a pale, hollowed-out look to her, she tries to smile when she sees me. Max is eating from a packet of red frogs. I knock on the window and Lucy unlocks my door. I slide into the driver’s seat. Behind me, Noll is reading a book propped against his knees.

‘Where’d you go?’ he asks

‘I left something behind.’

‘What?’ asks Max.

‘Nothing, it doesn’t matter, I found it. We should get moving.’

‘What was it?’ Noll asks.

I swallow. If I tell him about the gun now I’m pretty sure he’s going to be: a) pissed that I risked going back to get it myself; b) pissed that I’ve kept the fact that we have a gun from him all this time; and c) pissed that we have a gun – not just any gun, but the gun belonging to the guy we robbed.

‘*Nothing*.’

He holds my gaze in the rear-view mirror.

‘What you reading?’ I ask.

‘Psalms.’

‘Sarms?’

‘They’re like poems, like prayers.’

‘You read the bible?’ Max asks.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s weird.’

‘Tell me about it,’ says Noll.

‘Anyone feel like breakfast?’ asks Lucy.

We sit, parked on the street, among the grid of what used to be suburbia: telegraph poles, letterboxes, Colorbond fences. But no lawns, just patches of brown grass among the snow. And no barking dogs. We eat dry Nutri-Grain, passing the box around like a packet of chips. Twice we see a figure emerge from a house about two hundred metres down the street. It looks like a woman. She stands on the driveway and looks in our direction, then goes back inside the house.

Max opens a packet of Fantales and passes them around. Lucy gets Nicole Kidman and I get Harrison Ford. Max gets Paul Newman, whom no one but Lucy has heard of. Noll doesn't have a Fantale because he says he doesn't like lollies, which is the weirdest thing I've ever heard.

The woman comes out onto the street for the third time and walks toward us. I don't think anyone else has noticed. I start the car and begin to pull away from the kerb.

'What are you doing?' asks Noll.

'Up front.'

'Oh.'

The woman breaks into a run and yells out. As I pass her she rushes to the side of the car and thumps on the window. Her cheeks are concave, sunken, and again I can't tell how old she is. Her eyes meet mine as we drive past. I see her in the rear-view mirror, standing there behind us. I stop the car and wind down the window. Nobody objects. In the mirror I see her jogging toward our car.

'Thank you! Thank you!' When she gets to my window she is breathless. 'Do you… Do you have any food?'

'Yes,' answers Lucy.

The woman peers in at us, hugging herself in the cold. Her fingernails are all bitten, almost torn from her skin. Like she has started to eat herself.

Lucy gets out of the car, goes around and opens the boot. She gives the woman a box of cereal. The woman hugs it to her chest and watches as Lucy gets back in the car.

'Are you going to try and get through the barrier into the city?' she asks.

'My mum is there,' I tell her.

'There must be a gap somewhere. My neighbours went and they must have got through because they didn't come back.'

I think of the cars smashed up against the barricade.

'We're going to find a way through,' Lucy says.

'Well, take care,' says the woman.

Noll passes me the bag of caramels from the backseat and I hold them out the window to her. 'Go on. We've got enough.'

She hesitates then reaches out and accepts the packet. She rolls the top of it down tightly, sealing in the precious contents.

We pull away.

She is like a mum waving her kids off to school.

Thirty

In the light of day we can see that on the far left of the barrier that blocks the highway, there is a gate, just wide enough for a car. Two soldiers pace along the barricade. They each hold assault rifles and as we drive toward them they slow their pacing and watch. One of them stops as I roll down the window. His face is expressionless.

'You can read the sign. Documents.'

'Three bottles of whisky. One box of food.'

He looks at me with that same empty expression and I wonder what the penalty is for attempting to bribe military personnel.

'Any smokes?' he asks eventually.

I shake my head.

'Two boxes.'

'One.'

'No deal.'

I call his bluff, start to wind up the window.

'Wait.' He looks through at Max, who smiles widely and displays a bottle of whisky like he's a game-show assistant.

'Show me the food.'

'Put your gun down.'

He sighs, sets the rifle down at his feet. Next to me, Lucy opens the lid of the box that sits on her lap. We have put together a nice little hamper of canned soup, breakfast cereal, potato chips, rice, dried apricots, cheddar cheese, and toilet paper.

'There's no chocolate,' says the soldier.

'Jeez,' says Lucy.

'You wanna get through or what?'

'Fine. Noll?'

Noll leans over the backseat and rummages through the boxes of food in the boot. He pulls out a Kit Kat and hands it to Lucy.

'Alright, drive up to the gate. Pass the stuff out and I'll open her up.'

'You let us through, then we give you the food.'

He looks less than keen on the idea.

'Come on, if we try and drive off you can just pepper the shit out of us, get the food anyway.' I hope I haven't just given him an idea.

'Drive up to the gate.'

I follow his instructions. He opens the gate and as we are driving through I hear shouting behind us. In the rear-view mirror I see several people on bicycles riding toward the barricade. The other soldier has his rifle pointed at them and is shouting at them to stop. They keep pedalling toward the gate. I accelerate through, two of

them right behind the car. The soldier shouts again. The sound of gunfire, like firecrackers, punches the air. I see both riders fall. Lucy screams and covers her eyes. Noll has his hand over Max's eyes.

I stop the car as the first soldier closes the gate behind us. He comes up to my window.

'Hand it over then,' he says, as if nothing has happened. Lucy hands me the box and I pass it through the window to him, my hands shaking. Noll passes through the three bottles of whisky. I give them to the soldier.

'Hope you got more of them,' he says. 'They're doing random checks for documents on this side. You wanna hope they're thirsty.' He walks away from the car.

There are more people on the streets here than on the other side. They congregate on corners but don't give us more than a glance. They mustn't be as hungry. The streets are icy but drivable, walkable. My mother's apartment is in Annandale, a suburb close to the centre of the city. I weave the car around blocks of houses and apartment buildings.

It is incredible how much things have degenerated after three months without proper infrastructure. The most noticeable thing is the rubbish, piled on the footpaths outside apartment buildings: discarded drink bottles and plastic food packaging spilling onto the street. The most elite inner-city suburbs have become swamps of rubbish, abandoned cars and mounds of grey slush. I count four half-starved dogs wandering the streets and three more lying dead on the side of the road – family pets turned away from homes where food is too scarce to feed them. I also start to notice bright yellow posters taped to the telegraph poles and glued to the side of buildings. I slow the car to look closer at one. It reads:

> **If you notice people sheltering in unusual places, like bus shelters, warehouses or in vehicles, you must alert the authorities. If you know of anyone harbouring people whom you suspect are not residents of the inner district, it is for your own protection that you notify the authorities. These people are unauthorised refuge-seekers and are a threat to YOU and YOUR FAMILY. Speak up, it's for your own good.**

'Lovely to know we're welcome,' says Lucy.

I try to pick up the pace.

The last time I had been to my mum's was Christmas Eve. Max and I had sat through the world's most awkward lunch with Mum, her new boyfriend Steve, and his two kids: a girl and a guy, both at

university. The conversation didn't really progress beyond 'Can you pass the rolls?' If I had known it would be our last Christmas under (somewhat) normal circumstances I probably would have made more of an effort.

Lucy and Noll wait in the car while Max and I make our way past the rubbish that is piled up out the front of the building. We walk up the path through what was once garden but is now just dead shrubs. We go through the front doors of the apartment building into the little tiled foyer. A glass security door blocks the stairs leading up to the apartments. I hit the button on Mum's intercom, even though I know it is pointless. Max pulls at the handle of the locked door.

'How're we gonna get in?' Max asks.

I go back outside and tilt my head back, looking up in the direction of the third-floor balcony.

'MUM!' I scream. Max follows and does the same. We stand there screaming like idiots for way longer than is necessary. The thought that she might not be here had visited me from time to time, but I had put it in the 'I'll worry about that when it happens' category. I give up yelling and take to ramming the glass door with my shoulder instead. It's more painful and about as effective.

'We need something heavy,' I say. Max points to a large terracotta pot with a dead shrub in it by the door.

'If you take one side and I take the other, we can swing it into the door,' I say.

'It'll break the glass,' says Max.

'That's the idea.'

'Cool!'

Together we lift the pot and shuffle over so we are in front of the door.

'On three, yeah?'

Max nods.

'One, two, three.' We hurl the pot toward the glass. It connects and the door shatters with a splintering popping sound. We pick our way across the glass-littered foyer and head up the stairs. Apartment doors open, people come out, looking down the stairwell at us.

'Oi!'

'What the hell are you doing?' yells one of them.

'Sorry, we broke your door,' says Max.

'Yeah, you should be!' yells someone else.

'We're looking for our mum,' I tell them. Most drift away. One guy stares at us as we come up the stairs.

'You shouldn't 'ave done that,' he growls. We ignore him and he goes back inside, slamming his door shut.

We reach Mum's door. I bang on it with my fist.

‘Mum!’

Max joins in. We wait, both of us out of breath from breaking the door. I pound on the door again. ‘Mum!’ We wait. And we wait. Both of us stand there for a long time, well beyond the point when it’s obvious she is not there. I glance at Max, his forehead is creased with worry.

‘What are we going to do, Fin?’

I have no answer.

‘What are we going to do?’

‘I don’t know.’

His voice hardens. ‘You said we would find her.’

‘I said we could try.’

‘You said it would be okay.’ He hurls the words at me. ‘You don’t know anything.’

‘Max…’

‘You’re useless! You don’t know anything!’ He shoves me against the wall, catching me by surprise.

‘Max, just calm down.’

‘You calm down!’ He pummels me with his fists. I try to take hold of his arms, manage to get him in a bear hug.

‘Max, calm down.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘We’ll break in and we can stay, wait till she comes back.’

‘What if she doesn’t?’

‘It’s all we can do.’

Back at the car I suggest my plan to Noll and Lucy.

‘Did anyone see you go in?’ asks Lucy.

‘Kind of. We had to smash the security door.’

‘Right. Subtle. So we’re talking more than one person?’

‘More like the whole building.’

Lucy and Noll look at each other.

Noll shakes his head. ‘It’s too much of a risk. You saw that notice.’

‘I don’t see what choice we have. It’s less risky than sleeping in the car, that’s going to look pretty bloody suss, isn’t it?’

‘I’m not comfortable with it. We’re going to have to break down the door, unless you know how to pick locks, Lucy. Obviously not part of Fin’s repertoire.’

‘Unfortunately, lock picking is not one of my many skills,’ says Lucy.

‘Then that’s only going to mean more attention, just in case anyone missed you smashing the door,’ says Noll.

‘Okay. Let’s all start hating on Fin ’cause he was trying to find his friggin’ mother.’

‘I’m not being facetious, Fin. I’m trying to figure this out.’

‘Guess what? Me too.’

‘Do you two want to take it outside?’ asks Lucy.

Neither of us reply.

‘Right. Well, if anyone’s interested in my opinion, I think we should drive around and see if there’s another option, accommodation-wise. Somewhere we can at least hide for the night. I’m reluctant to leave all the food in the car, but if we take it all up into the apartment – which we have just broken into – people are going to see us and then we will be four kids in an apartment with a broken door and a mother lode of food surrounded by possibly starving people who may not only attack us, but call in the military while they do it. So I’m going for plan B.’

‘Which is to make another plan?’ asks Max.

‘Exactly, my friend.’

‘We would be able to defend ourselves,’ I say.

‘What? With the gun?’ asks Noll, in a sulky, trying not to be interested way.

‘How do you know about—’

‘I saw you pull it out from under your seat when we were at the barricade.’

‘Oh.’

‘Were you going to tell me you had a weapon at some point?’

‘I dunno, I thought you’d freak out.’

‘You thought I’d freak out? Who the hell do you think you are? Jason Fucking Bourne?’

‘Noll, I’m sorry.’

‘Did you know about this?’ he asks Lucy.

‘Don’t be pissed at her, I told her not to tell you.’

‘Oh, how kind. And what about Max? He know about this?’

‘No.’

‘You have a gun!’ Max can hardly contain his excitement.

‘Okay,’ Noll continues, ‘so it’s like, “We won’t tell the thirteen-year-old and the Christian – they can’t handle that kind of thing”.’

‘I’m twelve,’ says Max.

‘I thought we were on the level. I took you in. I gave you food. And this is how it goes? What? You think I’d flip out and say Jesus was a pacifist and make you get rid of it?’

‘I dunno. Yeah.’

‘Do we really feel this is the best time for this conversation?’ asks Lucy.

Again, neither Noll nor I have a reply.

‘Right. So we’re driving and we’re looking for somewhere to hide. And if you two start up again you can get out and walk. I’m the driver

and these are my rules. So sort it.’

Thirty-one

The night begins to close in. We have limited fuel, but if we stop we will be noticed. Lucy navigates the grid of city streets and as it gets darker, we see fewer and fewer people and definitely no other cars driving around. If we want to draw attention to ourselves we are going the right way about it. We come across a shopping centre like a monolith and the headlights catch a giant blue arrow pointing down a tunnel to the car park. A sign from above.

'Good idea,' Noll says as if he has read my mind.

The boom gates have already been smashed through. Lucy follows the dark tunnel down into the concrete bunker and as we drive in, shadowy figures scatter like cockroaches in a kitchen. The darkness is broken by the glow of several small campfires. They send breathing light up concrete pylons, illuminating numbers and letters. We stop in LG 2. The figures have all fled. It looks like there might be a stairwell in the northern corner of the car park.

'Seems we've found people like us,' Lucy murmurs.

We wait. My finger is curled around the trigger of the gun. In the rear-view mirror I can just make out Max's face. He looks like he could quite possibly be peeing himself, if he hasn't already.

There is movement in the doorway to the stairs. A group of people emerges, they get closer and I think that's the point where I stop breathing.

'They're zombies,' Max whimpers.

'Don't be a tool. They're not zombies.' I'm not entirely sure, though.

The shadows move closer to the car. Then a torch is flicked on and shone through the windscreen. We squint in the glare. The person with the torch holds it beneath their own chin, an apparition from a campfire ghost story. It is an old woman, in her sixties or seventies. She leans down, face in my window.

'Um, hi,' I say.

'Teenagers,' she says over her shoulder. The group that stand behind her murmurs and some of them drift away.

'Safe!' a man bellows across the car park. More figures emerge from pockets of shadow and return to the fires. The woman steps back from the car door as if she expects me to get out. I do. I'm about a foot taller than her and she tilts her wrinkled face up to me.

'You look very skinny. You should eat more.'

I laugh, I can't help it. She smiles, but her eyes stay serious.

'You want to set up over on the side: safer.'

'Okay.'

‘I am Rosa. I have been here two months. Very long time to live in a car park. You be sensible and you will be alright.’

‘Okay.’

‘Who are your friends?’

I introduce the others.

‘And where are your mothers?’ Rosa asks.

Max starts to cry.

‘Oh my darling.’ Rosa goes to him and wraps his little body in her arms. She strokes his hair and he really loses it. ‘Go,’ she says to the rest of us. ‘Unpack your things. I will look after this one.’ I don’t know why, but I trust her. And it’s kind of nice to have someone else worry about Max, even if only for a few minutes.

We try to arrange blankets on the ground, so we can sleep. A man comes over to us. He shakes my hand and says his name is Alan. He is tall, clean-shaven and his face looks like it has seen a lot of sun. He holds a book in his left hand. On his feet are polished RM Williams boots. He points to two mattresses in a cluster of stuff near by.

‘Use them,’ he says. ‘Folks been gone days now. Not comin’ back.’

We drag the mattresses over to our spot. Alan helps us lug the coffee table from the back of the station wagon. I take to it with the axe and am grateful that we bothered to cram it into the car. Alan tells us we should keep one leg aside and carve a calendar into it. ‘It will help,’ he says. Although he doesn’t say what with.

‘You got a bucket?’ he asks.

‘Um, no.’

He goes back to where we got the mattresses from, pokes around and comes back with a green bucket.

‘When you go out again, get some snow, clean as you can find. Put the bucket by the fire – use the water for washing. There’s toilets in the shopping centre, but don’t forget to take a torch or a candle, no windows in there, dark as buggery.’

I can’t help but think of news stories about disease in refugee camps. Maybe fragranced hand-sanitiser is going to solve the world’s problems after all.

There is no daylight down here. Alan asks Lucy if the clock in our car is still working. He calls her ‘love’ and I wince. But he says it to her in such an old-fashioned way that she beams at him like he is her grandfather. He tells us to honk the horn once when it is seven am and twice when it is seven pm. It helps people cope, apparently.

Rosa returns Max to us and he looks better than he has for days. I make us instant noodles for dinner: one paper cupful each. Noll reads his bible while he eats.

‘Is your family religious?’ Lucy asks.

‘Christian. I’m not a fan of the word religious.’

‘But you believe in God?’

Noll answers yes as though he is perplexed by it.

‘So what’s He doing, do you think, God?’

Noll gives a small laugh. ‘I don’t presume to know the mind of God.’

‘Tricksy. You guys are all very tricksy with your words, good at getting around questions.’

Noll shrugs. ‘I don’t know what He’s doing. That’s the truth.’

‘But you still believe in Him.’

‘I don’t understand Him, but I believe in Him.’

‘Hmm. Good answer, my friend. Do you like God?’

‘I love Him.’

‘But do you like Him?’

Noll puts a forkful of noodles in his mouth and chews. ‘Not right now.’

‘Do you mind talking about this? Because my head is all… knotty right now. I’m trying to get a handle on everything and I can’t. I don’t really understand your level of faith, and I’d like to. Like, the thought that it is just us, just dumb humans doing dumb things like annihilating each other, the thought that there’s no one or nothing above us, no one who knows any better than us, that thought is horrifying.’

Noll nods. ‘It absolutely is.’

‘But how can you believe that a powerful God could let this happen?’

Noll hesitates, thinking. ‘The bible constantly talks about how the world isn’t the way God wants it to be and how believers will feel alien here, we will never feel at home because this isn’t our home. And that has always resonated with me. Always.’ He doesn’t look directly at us as he speaks. ‘God doesn’t want this and… and I know that it won’t be forever… and that is why I am clinging on to God. That’s all it is – clinging. There’s no beauty in it, no eloquence. I’m not offering thoughtful articulate wise prayers every day. I’m screaming at Him to make it stop.’

‘You don’t think that maybe He doesn’t make it stop because He doesn’t exist?’

Noll nods. ‘I just know He does exist. I know it like I know that clouds make rain, that their are nine planets in our solar system—’

‘Eight,’ interrupts Max. ‘Pluto’s not a planet.’

‘Well, that’s debatable too. But as far as God goes, there is no other way it can be, to me. And if I thought He didn’t exist, I wouldn’t bother trying to survive. I would have quietly ended it at home after the missiles when I knew my parents were dead and I knew what

would likely come of all this. If you take Him out of the equation, well, I don't see the point of anything. That's just who I am. Some say believing is a comfort, a crutch… But… answering to no one but yourself? I can't imagine what that would be like. It would be freeing but hollow. A little like what you are saying – horrifying.'

'What about you, Fin?' Lucy asks. 'You believe in God?'

'Gee, you don't really do small talk, do you?'

She smiles and waits for an answer.

'I don't know.'

'Do you pray? Sorry, that's a really personal question.'

'As opposed to if I believe in God.'

'I don't know if I believe in God. But I've been praying lately. I wonder if that pisses Him off,' she says.

'Well, He can't be pissed off if He doesn't exist,' I reply.

'If He doesn't exist why do we pray to Him?'

'I think God's a woman,' says Max.

'Right on, my friend,' Lucy says and Max grins like an idiot. 'Although I don't think a woman would ever let this happen to her children. You didn't answer my question, Fin. God: yay or nay?'

'My dad didn't believe in God,' I say. 'Mum did, does, whatever. If He is out there He's doing a pretty shit job.'

'So you don't know if you believe or not?'

'No. That's my catchphrase for life at the moment: I don't know.'

We sit and eat for a bit while Max tells us the reasons for Pluto's demotion.

'What flavour is this?' asks Lucy, when he is finished. 'Hang on, let me guess. Chicken.'

'Correct,' I say.

'Doesn't human flesh taste like chicken?' asks Max.

'Dunno, Maximum. Haven't eaten anyone lately.'

Max rolls his eyes and shovels another forkful into his mouth. 'That's sad, Fin, that's like a total dad joke.'

I can't laugh. I try and I can't. Max looks at me with those big, bloody sorry eyes, like he's pushed me over harder than he meant to.

Lucy sleeps beside me, one arm across my chest. It's a scenario I used to fantasise about, although the whole nuclear winter thing kind of puts a dampener on it if I'm honest. I stare up into the black of the ceiling and imagine stars. It's been months since I've heard music, but I play songs in my head. I have so many stored and so much other stuff that I don't touch.

Thirty-two

I leave as soon as morning comes. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust from the gloomy half-light of the car park. Before I left, Alan told me to be discreet and not let anyone see me come out of the car park. I don't think anyone does, the street is deserted. I try to move quickly but not quick enough to look suspicious. It's a fine balance.

Without sunlight the streetscape is a tired palette of greys – even the rubbish over the footpath seems drained of colour. Delicate flakes of contaminated snow drift down from the sky. The snow will stop falling in an hour or so, it usually does. Maybe it's my imagination, but there seems to be less snow falling than there was the day before.

It doesn't take long for me to reach my mum's apartment building. I walk through the shattered front doors and head up the stairs. When I reach her door I pound my fist against it and shout. There is a sound, the scrape of a security chain. My breath stops in my chest.

'Who you looking for?'

The voice comes from behind me. A woman stands in the doorway of the apartment opposite my mother's. She wears eye make-up and her hair is neatly brushed. I can imagine her power-walking with a designer pram.

'Libby Heath, I mean, Streeton. Libby Streeton. She's my mother.'

'She hasn't been there for ages. Some army people came one day and she left with them. Haven't seen her since.'

'You don't know where she went?'

'No. Sorry. You're her son?'

'Yeah.'

'Thought you might be, you know, an illegal from the West. They got a group of them yesterday, family across the street were housing, like, seven of them.' She shakes her head. 'It's so wrong. I mean, what right do they think they've got to come across and take food that is ours?'

'Um, yeah, I guess. Look if you see my mum can you tell her I came by?'

'Sure. But, like I said, I haven't seen her in ages.'

'Okay. See you.'

I go down the stairs and head back to the car park.

I draw the four of us on a life raft made of two-minute noodles, bobbing on waves as the noodles dissolve in the water. Everyone else sleeps while I sit and try to make a sail out of chip packets.

We have been here maybe three days when, one morning, I honk the horn and someone follows it by calling 'Wednesday!' across the car park. Everyone begins to head for the ramp. Rosa walks past us, she clicks her tongue. 'Rations! Come!'

Alan is standing at the exit telling people to leave sporadically and not to run.

'Don't give us away,' he says. He puts a hand on my shoulder as we pass and pulls me aside.

'Son, they do spot ID and address checks at the ration points. Your best bet is to run. If they get you, someone else'll be using your mattress. I've been here months now, no one's ratted us out yet. I don't think they've been given the chance, if you know what I mean.'

I look to Lucy. 'Stay here with Max?'

She frowns.

'Only two of us need to go,' I say.

She raises one eyebrow, looking less than impressed. Then she turns around and heads back down the ramp.

'We'll be back soon,' I tell Max.

'How come you get to do all the cool stuff?'

'Max, going out there isn't "cool stuff". We'll be back soon.'

Noll and I leave the car park and head along the street in the direction Alan has told us. Turns out a lot of effort goes into not looking suspicious. I have to fight the instinct to constantly look over my shoulder and check if anyone was studying us for signs that we might be illegals. I put my hands in my pockets because that seems like the sort of thing a casual-feeling person might do. (Not that many people would have been feeling casual in the middle of all this, but I'm pretty sure they wouldn't be sweating profusely even though it's about one degree.) I'm doing a better job than Noll, though, who is walking way too quickly. I tell him and he just mutters something under his breath. We round a corner and up ahead, at a big intersection a few blocks away, there is a line of people in the street. We join the queue, neither of us really able to stand still.

There are two army trucks, troop carriers. Guys in camo stand on the backs of the trucks and pass boxes down to the people. Two others stand beside the line, pulling the occasional person out and demanding ID. As they get closer to us I have to keep reminding myself to breathe. They stop at a boy a few people in front of us. He's maybe a year older than Max.

'ID,' barks one of the officers. He has that drawn, hungry look to him, eyes a little too wide like he's looking for someone to take it out on. The kid feels around in his pocket, then turns and bolts. The officers tear off after him. I don't know if they were planning to ask

me and Noll next. I clench my fists in my pockets in an attempt to stop shaking. We edge toward the front of the line to within reaching distance of the boxes. Then it is our turn and the guy on the truck hands me a box. I look up at him and our eyes meet and I freeze. It is the young guy from the border, the one who gave me back the gun. Noll and I glance at each other. Noll has recognised him too. The army guy pauses for only a second, but I notice it. I take the box and lower my eyes. I am ready to bolt. But he says nothing. He gives Noll a carton of water. Noll looks him right in the eye and says 'Thank you'. We leave quickly.

Neither of us says a word until we are back in the car park. I drop the box to the ground and let my legs give way beneath me, still shaking with adrenalin.

'That was him, wasn't it?' says Noll.

'Who?' asks Lucy, opening the box to see what we've scored.

'The guy from the border, the first one, that put us up against the fence.'

'He was there? He saw you both?'

I nod. 'He gave me that.' I point to the box.

'He didn't do anything?'

'No,' says Noll. 'He just gave us these.'

'Did he see you come back here?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Nobody followed us,' says Noll.

'Are you sure?'

'Well, there's nothing we can do if they did,' I say.

'We can leave.'

'Nobody saw us. He didn't rat on us. I trust him. He gave me back the gun that night. I think he's okay.'

But I am uneasy for the rest of the day.

In the early hours of the morning Lucy and I lie beside each other in the dark, close, but not quite touching. The fire has withered to a mound of glowing embers. On the other side of me, Max snores softly in his sleep.

'Have you thought about how we might never see our parents again?' Lucy asks me, her voice so soft, barely more than a breath.

'A bit.'

'I used to be so afraid of my parents dying when I was younger.'

'I don't think they're going to die, Lucy. I really don't.'

'You can't know that, Fin.'

'I know, I just—'

'You can't protect everyone. You can't protect me.'

'Luce.'

‘Like today, me staying back with Max while you and Noll go off and get supplies. What’s that about?’

‘I want you to be safe.’

‘What makes you think I can’t look after myself? What? Just because I’m a girl I need you to protect me?’

‘No, I… I don’t know.’

‘I saved *you* with a cricket bat, my friend.’

‘I know, I just… You saw those guys at the shelter…’

‘You think I’m going to get raped or something?’

‘I just want you to be safe.’

She sighs and I think she is pissed off. Instead she takes my hand.

Alan is camped against the wall adjacent to us. He has a swag, a small camp stove and two boxes crammed with books which he has stacked like shelves. He sits with his back against the wall and reads. I go over and ask him what he is reading.

‘Hemingway. Pull up a pew,’ he says, pointing to an upturned milk crate. I sit down and he makes me a cup of black tea. ‘Remember sugar? I used to have it white with three sugars. Not any more, hey?’

I take the warm enamel cup from him.

‘Hemingway was an arse,’ he says. ‘But he could write, gotta give him that. Have a look.’ He motions to the books. ‘You’re welcome to anything you want.’

I scan the titles and stop on the silver spine of *Heart of Darkness*. It’s funny the things that get to you. I try to swallow the lump in my throat. I pull the book free of its neighbours.

‘We were studying this at school,’ I manage.

‘Ahhh, Mr Joseph Conrad – what we are when nobody’s watching. Good stuff. Take it.’

‘Thank you.’

I drink my tea and think how I’ve drunk more tea in the last three months than I have in my entire life. I guess it’s what people do, isn’t it? Like after funerals. There’s something soothing about the normality of it.

Alan tells me that he’s from the country and was staying with his brother when the army first came into the city.

‘They went from street to street, syphoning fuel out of cars in exchange for food,’ he says. ‘Then a month or so back, when things started getting real hairy, they began exchanging food for information on people who were staying here from across the border.’

‘He told them about you?’

Alan shrugs. ‘Left before he had a chance. We were never that close. I was with him because my sister passed away just before all this started, before the missiles and what not. The young fella your

brother?' he asks.

'Yeah. Don't know where my mum and dad are.'

'You keep him close then, won't you?'

'I will.'

Thirty-three

I draw Alan floating on the sea sitting in a bookshelf, pages scattered on the surface of the water. I draw the scene I remember from the supermarket, with the doors smashed and the shelves nearly bare. It occurs to me that drawings may be the only lasting record of what is happening.

Dinner: dried apricots, canned baby carrots and sweet corn, rice crackers: 'Now 92 per cent fat-free!'

'Is there anywhere else you can think of where we might be able to find your mum?' Noll asks.

I stab a baby carrot with my fork. 'She left with army officers. Government House maybe, army barracks. Nowhere we can go looking without getting caught.'

'But if you gave her name, said you were her son?'

'I don't have any proof.'

'She would know the situation on the other side of the border. You'd think she would have tried to get you out.'

'Well, it didn't work, did it?'

'Should we have stayed there?' asks Max. 'What if she goes back for us?'

'It's too late now.'

'But what if she goes back for us, Fin, and we're not there?'

'I don't know. I don't fucking know.' I throw the empty tin can into the fire, stand up and walk away from our camp. I head up the ramp onto the darkened street. It's colder up here away from the collective warmth of the campfires. It's also pitch black. I pull my hood up over my head. There are footsteps and a torch beam behind me, I turn around to see Lucy jogging to catch up to me.

'Fin, slow down.'

'You shouldn't have followed me.'

She falls into step beside me. 'Well, I don't want you to fall over in the dark and break your neck. I like you, you see.'

'I don't know what to do.'

'I know. Me neither. But for now we just bide our time, enjoy the serenity of the car park.'

I kick at the snow, harder and harder, it flies up, a shower of white flecks in torchlight. 'And I'm sick of being asked. I don't want to make any more fucking decisions.'

'I get that. Do you want to walk for a bit? It's probably ridiculously dangerous, but YOLO and what not.'

'I like to live on the edge.'

'Yes, I've noticed you're the risk-taking type.' She takes my arm.

We drift along the streets past houses and a crippled petrol station, shops and a school. The night sky is a void, no light, no stars. We are lost to the universe. We can't see out. I wonder if anyone can see in.

We pause and gaze up into the void. Lucy brushes my cheek with her fingers. I look down at her, take her face in my hands and kiss her gently on the mouth. A ball of heat wells in my stomach, and other places if I'm honest. I pull away and lean my back against a telegraph pole, raising my face to the cold sky and trying to breathe like a normal person. Lucy watches me and I don't know how she isn't embarrassed. She traces her fingertip down the line of my jaw.

A collective decision is made that a trip to the shops is needed; firewood is getting low and we could do with more soap and toilet paper. The four of us climb the concrete stairs, around and around. Then we hit a fire door and when we push it open we find ourselves in the darkened shopping centre. The dull light that filters through the skylights reveals polished floors, high ceilings and frozen escalators. The glass façades of most shops have been cracked or smashed right through. Random objects are strewn along the walkways: bits of clothing, papers, bottles, broken EFTPOS consoles, coathangers. Our footsteps echo eerily through the silence. And I can't help but think of a zombie movie I once saw that was set in a shopping mall. I grip the heavy handle of the axe, and look around for anything wooden, but everything is stainless steel or plastic. We roam past clothing shops and mobile phone vendors, all four of us taking in the place as if it's an ancient ruin.

'Why not stay in here instead of the car park?' asks Max. 'Way comfier.'

'I think it's because there's more exits from the car park, more places to hide,' Noll answers. 'Also, it's not well ventilated enough for campfires. The place would fill with smoke.'

In the centre of one of the walkways is a piano. It stands like some sort of regal animal among the chaos. Lucy pauses before it, then sits down. She begins to play the first music any of us have heard for months. The notes fill the cavernous space, the sound is luminous. My skin prickles with goosebumps. She finishes the piece and gently closes the lid over the keys. Then she stands and we all just pause there for a minute looking at the piano. It's made of wood. Lucy's expression is like she's watching a beloved animal that has to be put down.

'We should keep moving,' I say.

We come to a department store, its roller security doors long

since kicked in. We take a trolley and light our way with torches, there's no skylights inside the store. The electronics section has been gutted: phones, cameras, televisions all gone; bet those people are rethinking their priorities. We go through to the clothing department and pull new clothes from the racks, changing out of our dirty layers on the spot. Then it's to manchester where there are no blankets left, but plenty of towels. We stock up on fancy soaps and, surprisingly, gift-packaged herbal teas. Finally we find the home furniture department. The 'Livingstone Nine-Piece' dining suite is on sale for nine-hundred and ninety-eight dollars. We take turns hacking into it with the axe and then throw its parts into the trolley.

In the evening we sit by our newly fed fire. We have moved our camp closer to Alan so we can share our fire with him. He and Lucy read novels. I draw the scene from the shopping centre. Noll reads his bible.

'Is this the end of the world?' Max asks him.

'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

'Jesus hasn't come back.'

'Serious?'

'Serious.'

'You really believe that?'

'Max,' I warn him.

'It's okay,' says Noll. 'I really believe that.'

'Are you mad at God? I'm mad at God, you know, if He's real.'

'I don't think God did this. People did this. People suck.'

'Not all people suck.'

'You don't think?'

'Do you think I suck?'

'Well, we all robbed a guy of food that was rightfully his.'

Alan glances up from his book. I desperately want Noll to shut up.

'But he had heaps!' says Max.

'Doesn't change the fact.'

'So you're saying we deserve this?' I ask.

'No. I'm just saying that we're all flawed. Like I said before, I cling to the knowledge that God is not.'

'That's crazy,' says Max.

'Perhaps. But do you have an alternative?' Noll asks.

'I dunno. I just reckon the idea that everyone is bad deep down is really depressing.'

'I just… I mean that we have choices. We chose to rob a guy of food that wasn't ours.'

'You think we made the wrong choice,' I say.

‘I’m not some moral arbitrator here just because I read the bible.’

‘You’re the one saying this shit. You were there too, you did it as well.’

‘All I’m saying, Fin, is what you already know.’

‘So, what’s *your* alternative then, Noll? We should have done the right thing and not stolen – and what? Died noble deaths from starvation? What would that achieve? Would that make the world a better place?’

‘I’m going to use your mantra, Fin: I don’t know… I really don’t. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to… aggravate things. It’s too late anyway, we did what we did,’ he says it so gently that I can’t come back at him. Anyway, I know he’s right, about us.

Thirty-four

I leave at first light again, carrying my old friend, the axe, with me. I walk a few blocks beyond the shopping centre. The ground is slick with melted snow. Already there are people around. On one corner a man trades soft-drink bottles full of kerosene for food. He calls out to me, holding a Fanta bottle outstretched.

I round a corner and am confronted by a row of about six houses that have been incinerated. All that is left are blackened frames and piles of charcoal. I walk along the street and see that the fire has partially destroyed two apartment blocks as well. I guess that with no working fire brigade a fire could get big enough to consume everything in its path. A figure stands among the rubble, prodding at the debris with a long stick. Further along, outside one of the unit blocks is an army truck. An officer emerges from the building with a dark shape carried over his shoulder. He dumps it in the back of the truck with others. It's then that I realise he was carrying a body. Bile rises in my throat and I vomit onto the pavement. The army officer barely gives me or my axe a glance.

The heap of rubbish outside my mother's apartment building now spills across the footpath and onto the street. A few metres further up the road a woman emerges from a house and dumps a bucket of raw sewage into the gutter. I go into the building, up the stairs. I pound on the door, already resigned to the fact that it is a waste of energy. Then I raise the axe over my shoulder and slug it into the door.

The chaos of the place is so typical of my mother it is reassuring. It's hard to say if it has been exacerbated in the last few months. I scan the mess for anything that might indicate where she has gone, letters, papers, anything. The lounge and adjoining kitchen offer no clues. I go through to the bedroom. The bed is unmade. Clothes lie discarded on the floor. Her nightstand is cluttered with books and then there, beneath a Stephen King thriller, a pile of papers. I clutch at them, knocking the stack of books to the floor. There are minutes from a university faculty meeting six months ago, car rego papers, travel itinerary for a conference, a library fine. Nothing useful. And then, as I drop the papers onto the bed, one of them slips off onto the floor, landing face down. On the back is scrawled a note: 'Crisis Response Headquarters, Sydney Town Hall'.

It's all I have.

Before I leave I go through her kitchen. There isn't much, but there's enough food to fill my backpack: Weet-Bix, dried fruit, rice cakes.

I have to walk for a while before I see a bike. It's chained up (push bikes have become quite the commodity) but I still have the axe and I'm more accurate with it than ever before. The ride into the CBD is surreal. The roads are cluttered with abandoned cars, signs of failed attempts at navigating the icy bitumen. The CBD feels like the empty set of a disaster movie, as if you could push against a wall and have it topple over, nothing more than plywood and styrofoam. Then I come to George Street, where office buildings merge with the main retail district of the city. I pass the Queen Victoria Building, a four-level shopping complex of sandstone, stained glass and nineteenth-century opulence. Nearly all of the large glass store-fronts that line the ground floor have been smashed. You can see where opportunism has gone from the initial smash and grab of luxury handbags and designer clothes to the desperate raiding of cafes for food and wooden chairs to burn.

Across the intersection from the Queen Victoria Building stands Sydney Town Hall. It looks gothic in the half-light; the same sandstone style as the Queen Victoria Building. The paved square between it and St Andrew's Cathedral further along is crowded with military vehicles, surrounding the escalators that lead from street level down below to what used to be a food court and entrance to the railway. The entire area is enclosed by a high razor-wire fence. Two army officers stand at the gates of the barrier. Another stands at the top of Town Hall's marble steps, in front of the doors.

I have nothing to lose.

I choose an officer, the one whose eyes are slightly more glazed than his companion's. He raises his chin defensively as I approach.

'Morning,' I say. He doesn't respond. 'Can you help me? I'm looking for my mother. I think she might be working here.' His grip on his weapon shifts. 'Her name is Libby Streeton, could you find out if she's inside? This is the Disaster Response Headquarters, isn't it?'

'I can't do that.'

'Why not? Could you just ask?'

'No. You need to vacate this area.'

'Why? Please, couldn't you just—'

He raises the rifle, points it directly at my chest. 'Piss off.'

'Would a bottle of whisky make it easier?' I ask. He narrows his eyes, prods the rifle into my ribs.

'I will fucking kill you,' he says. 'Piss off and don't come back.'

I back away, pick up my bike and ride back to the car park.

Max runs toward me as I enter the car park.

'Did you find her?' He is like an over-excited labrador.

'No. But I got a bit closer. I think. She might be at Town Hall.

There's a crisis response headquarters set up there or something. I couldn't get in.'

'Why not?'

'It was barricaded off. I couldn't get in.' The hope drains from his eyes. 'Don't worry. We'll keep trying, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

Thirty-five

Alan makes me a cup of strong black tea.

'You go to your mum's by yourself?' he asks.

'Yeah.'

'I'm not sure that's the wisest idea, mate. You should take Noll with you. I've heard of some very ugly things going on out there. Just the other day someone was attacked coming back from the ration handout. Stabbed. Food taken.'

'It's cool, I didn't have any food.'

'Even so. Do me a favour and take Noll with you next time.'

'Not sure he'd want to. We're not exactly best mates.'

'Is that right?' Alan eases himself down onto the floor next to me. He sips his tea and I notice his hand trembling.

'You eaten today, Alan?'

He shakes his head. 'Can't keep anything down. Stomach's crook.'

I feel my chest tighten when he says that.

'Aw, don't look at me like that, Fin. You'll break my bloody heart.'

'Alan, you know—'

He holds up a hand. 'I don't want to know. Knowin' ain't going to make any difference. Now, let's have a talk about your mate Noll.'

'Don't think he's ever really thought of me that way.'

'He's here with you, though. And would I be right in saying you wouldn't have got here if it weren't for each other?'

'Maybe.'

'You know what I think? I think he makes you see yourself a little clearer than you would like to. And that gives you the shits. No one wants to see themselves for what they really are.'

'Do you think it's alright to do whatever you need to do to survive?'

'No. No, I don't. But let's put it in a bit of perspective, you took some food from another man. You didn't kill him.'

I don't say anything.

'Did you?' asks Alan.

'No. I don't think so. Lucy hit him over the head with a cricket bat. He was going to shoot me in the head.'

Alan laughs, a generous, cracking sound. 'Jeez. Doesn't sound like a very nice bloke.'

'It's weird, 'cause, you know before all this, he was. I liked him. I'd known him since I was a kid.'

'Well, I've said it before: wars makes us all bastards. Or maybe Shakespeare said that.'

‘You think this is a war?’

‘Oh, it’s a war, son. Only we don’t know who the enemy is.’

Later I draw my mother’s apartment building from memory. I draw it as if it’s full of water, like a fish tank. Through the windows seaweed grows and fish swim. I don’t know why I’m drawing water all the time. But I know that if you breathe in underwater you die.

Lucy knows everybody in the car park by name. She goes around talking to people and joins in with a group of women who sit together and knit. There are thirteen little camps like ours, some are families, some are friends. One group are retirees from the same retirement village. They bribed their way across the border in the village’s minivan. Some families have children. We are the only group of teenagers.

Sometimes in the afternoons there is a soccer match. The four of us play and Max is better at it than I remember. Sometimes there is an argument over a foul and Alan has to step in to break it up. Sometimes things get so heated the game has to be stopped. We lie on our backs after each game, sweaty and panting and looking up at the concrete ceiling as if it were a blue sky.

Noll approaches me after lunch. I am swilling detergent in a saucepan when he comes up beside me.

‘I want to apologise about the other night. I didn’t mean to cause… unease. I know you’re stressed out about your mum. You don’t need to hear me going on about the frailties of the human condition.’

And I feel pissed off again because he has been the one adult enough to apologise and now I feel like a petty kid.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I say. I want to add that I’m sorry for being a tool, but the words don’t come.

Lucy isn’t around in the afternoon. I ask Noll and Max if they have seen her, but they haven’t. I wander around the car park, thinking maybe she is talking with Rosa somewhere, but I don’t find her. Then I remember and I go up the concrete stairs to the shopping centre. As soon as I push open the door I can hear it: the beautiful, delicate notes humming on the air. I walk through the cavern of the shopping centre to the piano. She sits, back straight as a dancer’s, moving her head gently with the undulation of the music. I sit next to her while she plays and when the song is finished she rests her hands on her lap, head bowed.

‘Do you think they’re dead?’ she asks.

‘Who?’

‘My family.’

‘No. I don’t know.’

‘You know, they used to tell me I could do anything, my parents. They said I could be anything, do anything I wanted to do, as long as I worked hard for it. I believed it. I believed that if I worked hard enough I could get a spot at the Sydney Conservatory of Music. I would become a composer because, you know, there are a lot of jobs around for that now.’ She sighs. ‘What a presumptuous dickhead.’

‘How does wanting to study music make you a presumptuous dickhead?’

‘I don’t know. But I thought I was entitled to it. Just like I thought I was entitled to good food and a nice house and nice clothes. My family had three sponsor kids, for God’s sake. Surely *that* entitled me to a nice cushy life. Do you ever think about how distorted your view of life used to be? Like, my mum used to say that the greatest tragedy was someone who didn’t make use of their talents and live up to their full potential. The greatest tragedy. The greatest tragedy is children dying of starvation, don’t you think? Who gives a shit if they can play the piano.’

‘Look, I don’t know if you’re a presumptuous dickhead or not.’ Lucy punches me softly in the arm. ‘But isn’t there some philosophy about how it’s the arts that separate humans from animals?’

‘Really? I thought it was not eating our young.’

‘You know what I mean. Just because music and art and stuff doesn’t feed you, doesn’t mean it’s not important. It still kind of makes us who we are. Is that way too corny?’

‘Almost.’ She smiles. ‘You are very sweet, though, you know that?’

‘You say that to all the guys you flee nuclear winters with.’

She leans over and kisses me on the lips. ‘And you still taste good,’ she says, and I feel myself blush, just like that day so long ago on the bus.

Thirty-six

Ration day. This time I head out with Lucy and keep my thoughts about her safety to myself. She hasn't been out like this in the daylight (I use this term loosely) before. We walk along the street and she gapes at the state of the place, the rubbish, the desperate chaos of it all.

The army truck is parked in the same place as it was last time. The line for food is three blocks long. We inch forward at a glacial pace. The worst part is the cold. It eats at your toes and fingers first, then moves on for its share of your limbs. People grow impatient, sighing loudly and muttering 'Oh, *come on*' as if it will make a difference. Then they start comparing stories: 'We waited three hours last week', 'Have you seen the size of the water bottles? It's a joke!'

'Jeez, there better not be any illegals here,' says someone loudly. 'I bet there bloody is, didn't take this long last week.'

'Yeah,' says Lucy. 'They're taking our share, scum!'

People jeer in agreement. I elbow her, only encouraging her more.

'Should go back to where they bloody came from!' she says.

'Too right, sweetheart!' says someone and everyone else murmurs in agreement. The line crawls forward. Two hours later we are metres from the truck. An army officer hands a bag of rice to a man ahead of us.

'Is that it?' he says. 'That's a fucking crime!'

'Move on,' replies an officer standing beside the line.

'No, I won't move on. Give us another bag, that's a fucking disgrace, that is.'

'MOVE ON.'

'I'm not going anywhere, mate, until I get my share. Wouldn't feed a rabbit on that.'

'Move on or I will arrest you.'

'Go on then, arsehole. Arrest me.' The guy shoves the officer in the chest. Three more behind him join in, pushing and shoving the army guy before he has a chance to reach for his gun. The other officer grabs one of them, punches him in the jaw. And then, like a school of sharks after a drop of blood, the people around us start to yell and push, storming the truck, clambering on, grabbing at food. I grip Lucy's hand as the crowd surges around us. People snatch food from one another, men throw punches, women claw. Others squeal and cry. We are caught in the thick of people as they screech and scramble, kicking, gouging. Lucy is pulled from my grip by the tide of bodies. I scream her name, pushing against limbs. And then there is a

loud hissing sound and a mist of smoke cascades over the people. The burn that singes my eyes is agonising. I clamber, tears and salt streaming down my cheeks. Still, I scream her name, stumbling in my blindness. Then comes the spit and pop of gunfire. Screaming. Instinctively I fall to the ground, arms shielding my head, as if they would be of any use. I curl as feet scuff and tread over my limbs. Others fall. I scream Lucy's name again.

The scramble quietens. When the burning in my eyes has eased I lift my head. Around me some are doing the same. Others are not moving at all, their bodies lying twisted and lifeless. Metres from me the man who complained about illegals lies with half his face missing. I feel the tingle of blood rushing from my head but fight it, knowing that if I pass out I won't find Lucy. My legs arrange themselves so I am standing. I pick my way through the people. There is moaning and sobbing, pools of blood and vomit and piss. I scream for Lucy again. I can't remember what she was wearing and peer down at the faces of the fallen as I make my way to the side of the road. Around me, people stumble, clutching at each other.

'Have you seen a girl? Dark hair, pretty, my age?'

They look at me as if I am speaking a foreign language.

I wander along the footpath calling her name and then, cowering in the doorway of a shopfront, I find her. She is curled in a ball, hands clutching her ankle.

'Lucy?'

She sees me and begins to cry. I wrap myself around her.

'Are you hurt? Your ankle?'

'Someone stomped on it. Fin, I thought you were dead.'

'Can you stand?' I try to help her to her feet.

She tries but I see her wince with pain when she attempts to walk.

'Put your arms around my neck.'

She does and I lift her up. I walk back to the car park with her in my arms. She closes her eyes, head against my chest.

'Tell me when I wake up that this has all been a bad dream,' she whispers.

Word about the riot has already spread to the car park by the time we get back. Noll is layering up, ready to come looking for us. He visibly relaxes with relief when I walk down the ramp with Lucy. The whole place is subdued with a new tension that evening, nobody feels completely at ease. We eat little and turn in for the night. I hold Lucy close as we sleep.

The mood among our group has flatlined. Except for Max. He

deals with uncertainty by maintaining a constant stream of chatter and has taken it upon himself to be chief morale-booster. He does this mainly by telling us inane facts that he learnt from *National Geographic*.

'Did you know that octopi are really smart? It's true. They collect coconut shells and use them to build houses.'

I have one of those moments when my affection for him is so fierce, it is frightening. Somewhere inside I think I should be doing the opposite, I should be trying to let go – trying to let go of him, of everyone, so when the end comes the blow won't be as hard. But how do you do that?

I wonder how the octopi are doing now, if much has changed for them.

The cold is getting into my bones, burrowing through the blankets like they're tissue paper. Some of the women in the camp have gone into the shopping centre and collected all the plastic shopping bags. Rosa shows us how they can be torn into strips and knitted into blankets that insulate well. Everyone in the camp starts to work on blankets. It's weirdly peaceful. Noll and I tear the bags into strips and wind the lengths into balls to be knitted. Lucy knows how to knit and she shows Max how to do it – it's the kind of weird thing he finds fascinating. The days start to feel different now we have something concrete to work on, there's a rhythm to them that lifts the mood in the camp and people have started chatting to each other again.

More people come to the car park. More illegals. It makes Rosa nervous, she paces from one camp to another, craning her neck, supervising.

In the middle of the night someone screams and it ricochets around the concrete bunker, stabbing into the silence. There is a scuffle of shadows in the south corner, near the exit ramp. More yelling. People around us start to get up and head toward the noise, carrying torches. We follow.

There is a guy in an army uniform backed up against the wall. Shouts are flung at him and he cowers a little. He holds up his palms like he is trying to calm a pack of wild animals.

'I'm a deserter, I'm a deserter,' he repeats. 'I'm lookin' for shelter. Please.'

They aren't listening. The men are shouting at him. Women – mothers – throw random objects, the children copy. One kid, about eight years old, throws a glass bottle and it shatters against the wall.

'He's army and now he knows we are here,' yells someone. 'We

have to deal with him.'

Another guy grabs him by the arm, twists it behind his back. It's then that I see the army guy has an assault rifle slung across his back. The guy that holds him takes the rifle, passes it to another guy who aims it at the army guy's head. I move through the people to try to get a better view. Alan is behind me, he yells for calm in his booming voice. Nobody pays any attention.

'Shoot him!' yells someone. Others join in. I get close enough to see the army guy's face. He sees mine.

'You! Fin!' he yells. 'Fin, please!'

People turn and look as if they want to kill me too.

'It's okay,' I say. 'He's with me. He's safe.'

The guy still has the rifle pointed at him. I push my way to the front of the group.

'He's safe, let him go. He's with me. Please, please, put the gun down.' The guy with the rifle holds my gaze. 'Please.'

He throws the weapon onto the concrete and shoves the army guy toward me. I lean down and carefully pick up the rifle. People drop their improvised weapons as if they are disappointed that the entertainment is over.

I lead the army guy back to our camp, still holding his gun.

'This is us,' I say. He nods. 'Have a seat.' I point to the end of my mattress. He nods again and takes his backpack off. Max is staring, wide-eyed, as I carry the rifle to the car and he follows me. I unlock the boot and put the weapon inside.

'That is so cool,' says Max.

'I'm concerned about your perception of cool.' I close the boot and lock it. The army guy sits, back rigid as if he is ready to jump up again. He unzips his backpack and pulls out a heap of sealed foil packets. The backpack is full of them.

'Rations,' the army guy says. 'I took all I could carry. I'll share them with yez, if I can stay here.' He looks to each of us, desperation on his face. 'Look, there's more, there's meat and beans and chocolate —'

'It's okay,' Noll says. 'We just need to talk.'

The four of us, with Alan, walk a few metres from the camp.

'What do you think?' asks Noll.

'I don't know,' says Lucy. 'Can we trust him?'

'He didn't rat on us,' I say. 'Besides, I think we need him, his uniform anyway. I might be able to get past the barricade to my mum if I'm in uniform.'

The others agree. Army Guy can stay. When we tell him he nods, a bobbing up and down of his head, his gaze placed somewhere in the middle distance. He begins to put the rations back into his pack and I

can see his hands trembling. Lucy crouches down to help him.

Noll drags another mattress over. Alan tries to help but can't quite manage. I tell him to sit down and he doesn't argue. Lucy gives Army Guy some blankets. He takes them with a small 'thank you' and places them neatly next to himself.

'So, ah, this is Noll, Lucy, Max and Alan.'

Alan offers his hand. 'Pleased to meet you, mate.' Army Guy shakes his hand.

'Matt,' he says.

'You're the guy from the checkpoint,' Lucy says.

'I, um, talked to Matt a bit when I went back that night,' I explain. I wait for Matt to offer some information about why he's here, but he says nothing, just sits with his hands kneading at the handle of his pack.

'Did they move you from border patrol?' I venture.

'Yeah. 'Bout two weeks or so ago. Maybe.'

'Right.' We all wait. He offers nothing more.

'Well, you can stay here, son,' says Alan. 'If you want to.'

'Thank you.'

I don't know if he's safe. But he gave me the gun back that night and he didn't squeal on me and Noll at the ration line. He knows things, army things, survival things. He will be useful.

When we turn in for the night, Matt stays awake, knees drawn up to his chin. When I wake in the morning he is in the same position as if he hasn't moved all night.

In the morning we sit around our fire and talk, although Matt never says anything. Lucy gives him a bowl of rice but he doesn't eat it and gives it to me instead. Afterwards, Noll, Max, Lucy and I wash our clothes in buckets of icy water and hang them on a line strung between our car and another. Rosa has pegs that she lends to us. I am stretching out the wet slop of my T-shirts when Matt comes up to me, hands stuffed in his pockets.

'Fin, I was… I just wanna see if…' He speaks as though he is about to divulge a state secret.

'Yeah?'

'I have to get out of this uniform.' His eyes roam around the camp and he rubs his palm over the stubble on his scalp. 'You got any spare clothes?'

Between Max, Noll and I we manage to pull together enough clothes to keep him warm. Max has a spare beanie that he gives Matt, the red and white Swannies one. Lucy is the first to get an almost-smile out of him when she jokes she has some woolly tights he can wear too if he wants.

Matt strips off his uniform and pulls on the clothes we have given him. He carries his uniform over to the fire.

'Wait!'

He visibly jumps at my voice.

'Don't burn it. Give it here, I'll keep it.'

There is an afternoon soccer match. Matt doesn't play but sits with Alan, watching from the sidelines. The rest of the people in the car park are noticeably wary of him and the rest of us. But no one says he has to leave. Maybe they all want him where they can see him.

Afterwards we sit around, waiting out the time before the evening meal. Lucy asks Matt if he knows where his family is. Matt just shakes his head.

'We've been trying to find Fin's mother,' she tells him. 'We think she might be able to help us, she works for the government. Disaster response management, isn't it, Fin?'

Matt's face changes. It's a look of subdued anguish. He swallows, glances at me. 'You want to find her?'

It's a strange question.

'Yeah, of course.'

He nods that absent sort of head bob of his, like a nervous tic.

'I think she's at Town Hall. But I can't get in,' I tell him.

'Knew a guy who was workin' in there. Good guy, my corporal. He was a good guy, yeah. A real good guy.' Matt's eyes are far away. He draws his knees to his chin. 'But workin' in there? It screwed him up. Me, I just follow orders, don't have to make decisions… the really shitty decisions. That's what screws you up.'

That night I am shocked from my sleep by a yell. I sit up and, for a moment, I think I am at home in my bedroom, until the cold finds my cheeks and arms. There is another yell and in the smoulder of the fire I can make out the scrambling shadow of two figures entangled.

'Get your hands behind your head!' It's Matt. He's kneeling on someone's back as they flail against the concrete.

'Matt? What the hell?'

He doesn't answer me.

'Get off me ya psycho!' the pinned man yells.

'Matt! What are you doing?'

He looks at me and there is a blankness in his face – a vacancy – almost as if he is actually asleep. The guy beneath him takes the opportunity to scramble to his feet, but Matt snaps back into action and grabs him by the back of his hair.

'Matt, I know that guy, he's from here. He's one of us.'

Matt looks at me, then back to the guy.

‘Let him go, man.’

Matt’s eyes go from unfocused to panicked and he releases his grip, jumping back from the guy. I try to help the guy to his feet, but he shrugs me away.

‘I’m sorry, mate, it was a mistake, he didn’t mean it.’ It’s like I’m apologising for my disobedient rottweiler.

The guy points at Matt. ‘You… you’re a bloody psycho.’

Matt doesn’t speak. The guy gives him a final glare and lopes away, rubbing at the back of his head.

‘What the hell was that about?’

Matt raises his eyes to mine and he looks confused, dumbfounded. He shakes his head. Alan is now beside us.

‘You need to go to sleep, mate.’ He speaks to Matt gently as if he is a startled horse.

‘I can’t.’

‘Well, sit down. Sit here next to Fin.’ Alan guides him to the mattress. ‘I’ve got something that will help you.’

‘No, no. I don’t want drugs.’

‘Now you listen to me, son,’ Alan says. ‘You need to get some sleep otherwise you’re going to lose your mind. Got it? Sit down here, next to Fin. You’re okay, you’re safe. No one’s gonna hurt you, mate.’

Alan goes to his things and rummages around. He comes back with a small plastic bottle. He shakes some pills into his palm and hands them to Matt.

I sit with Alan, neither of us is able to get back to sleep. Alan polishes his boots on a sheet of newspaper, says he may as well make use of the time. He has a flat round tin of Dubbin and he works the oily cream into the leather with a grey rag. I can see in his face that he has lost weight.

‘Smell that?’ he says, pointing to the boot polish. ‘I smell that and I’m home. Lived out on the land my whole life, used to avoid the city like the plague. Now look at me.’ He shakes his head. ‘You know, it’s funny because back in the fifties and sixties everyone worried about this business, about nuclear war. The Russians were going to nuke us at any minute. And then it all went away. I wonder if we got complacent. My mother was a wise old stick. You know what she used to say to me? She used to say, Alan, never underestimate the human race’s ability to bugger things up… Much like your mate Noll was saying.’ He nods toward Matt, asleep, curled into a tight ball. ‘Don’t reckon I slept for a month after I got back from Vietnam.’

‘You were in the war?’

‘Oh, yeah. Seen things I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. And I was barely eighteen, just a lad, like this fella. I hate to say it, but if you make it out of this, you’ll never be the same.’

Thirty-seven

Lucy has scissors. She stands behind me and cuts my hair as short as she can, then she takes Alan's razor to it and shaves the rest. Side by side, Matt and I don't look all that different. I pull on his uniform, tie the laces of his big black boots. He gives me his ID badge and I put it in my pocket.

'What do I say to them?' I ask.

'Yer walk up, stand to attention.' He does it and I copy him. 'Yer salute.' He salutes and I notice as he stares into the middle-distance beyond me that his eyes are watery. I copy his salute. 'Yer say "Permission to enter, sir." And he will open the gates for yer.'

'Do I salute everyone I come to?' I ask him. He says nothing, still at attention, staring into the distance. 'Matt? Do I salute everyone?'

'Don't salute yer own rank.'

'What's my rank?'

'Private. Yer the lowest, yer nuthin'.'

I hug Lucy before I leave. I hold her close and breathe in her scent.

'If I don't come back, look after Max, yeah?'

'You'll come back. I like you in uniform by the way.'

'Thanks. I concocted this whole thing to impress you.'

She grips my hand. 'You will come back.'

I go to the car, open the door and reach under the driver's seat. I feel around until my fingers find the handgun, Starvos' gun. I am about to tuck it under my uniform when I turn around to see Noll standing behind me, watching.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm bringing the gun.'

'That's a really stupid idea.'

'No, going there with nothing is a stupid idea.'

'At least give it to me.'

'What?'

'I'm coming with you.'

'You don't have to. You don't have a uniform.'

'Do you even know how to shoot that thing?'

'Well…'

'I'm coming with you. You'll get yourself shot on your own.' He takes the gun from me and tucks it away in his coat. 'Come on.'

'I've only got one pushie.'

'Then we'll find another one. What? Did you think I wouldn't want to steal a bike because it's against the Ten Commandments?'

‘Well, yeah.’

‘That is so Old Testament.’

‘Is that your version of a joke?’

‘Shut up.’

We have to double on my pushie for a bit before we find another one. After that it’s a fairly quick ride into the business district of the city. We approach Town Hall from a different direction to the first time I came here, cycling up George Street, past the broken façades of the cinema complex and fast-food outlets. We stop on the corner adjacent to the cathedral, outside a gutted KFC store.

‘So what’s the plan?’ Noll asks.

I shrug, ready to vomit with nerves. ‘I go up, say I have a message for her.’

‘From who? They’re going to ask.’

‘I dunno. Was just going to make up a name, “Lance Corporal Mitchell”. That’ll do it.’

‘You think?’

‘Well, what other option do I have?’

‘I think it would be better to wait until they are distracted with something else. Ask when they are busy, when they’ll just want to get rid of you.’

‘Are you offering to distract them?’

‘No, I’m not. Just wait until they’ve got another arrival coming in or something. Be patient. See what happens.’

‘And what are you gonna do with the gun, exactly, if something goes wrong?’

‘I don’t know. But, I’m sure as hell not letting you in there with it.’

‘Seriously, Noll, I should take it.’

‘You can’t. They’ll pat you down before they let you in. And really, like you say, what are you going to do with it? Shoot your way out?’

He has a point. So we wait and after about half an hour, when I am just about to tell him his plan sucks, a truck engine rumbles through the silence.

Noll raises his eyebrows at me. ‘Try not to die. Good luck.’

I leave him and attempt to stride toward the barrier gates in a confident manner, repeating my rehearsed lines over and over in my head. A banner advertising a Wednesday morning ‘healing service’ hangs limply above the cathedral doors. I reckon that one will be popular when all this is over. If it’s ever over.

The truck pulls up at the gates, I walk beside it. The guards talk to the soldier driving the truck. They see me but don’t even say

anything. I walk straight through the gates. I go up the marble steps. At the top before the doors is another guard, his name badge has an 'Lt' before it. I stand to attention, salute. My mouth is so dry I wonder if I'll be able to speak at all.

'Permission to enter, sir?' I say. He examines me.

'What's your business here, private?'

'I have a message for a Libby Streeton.' His face doesn't change, waiting. 'From, ah, Lance Corporal, ah, Lance Corporal Noll.'

'Lance Corporal Noll?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You seem a bit on edge, private. Everything alright?'

'Everything is fine, lieutenant. It's just an urgent message. Is Libby Streeton here?'

'I couldn't say. You'll have to have a look.' He steps aside and opens the door.

Inside, the building bristles with noise and movement. I feel a sensation I haven't felt in a long time. Warmth; not the heat on my face from a fire that doesn't come close to warming my whole body, but a complete, enveloping warmth. In the foyer, fatigue-clad officers stack towers of ration boxes and pallets of bottled water beside a wall that is still lined with tourist brochures offering information about guided tours and the building's history. I walk through the foyer into a large room with high, ornate ceilings and gilded cornices, a chandelier the size of a small planet hangs in the room's centre. Rows of trestle tables have been set up beneath it and military personnel sit looking into laptop screens, rivers of electrical and telephone cabling run out to an adjoining room, the whole scene crowded with the relentless hum of generators. Other people stand in discussion before the vast wall space papered with maps. I can see through to the next room, larger still, filled with more desks and more people. At the far end, on the stage, is a huge screen showing footage of a desolate, rubble-strewn landscape.

'Can I help you?' an officer asks me, irritated. I realise I am clearly in the way.

'I'm, um, looking for Libby Streeton.'

I'm expecting him to say she's not here, but instead he glances around and points at a group of people up the far end, near the screen.

'Over there,' he says.

The officer hurries away and doesn't see the tears that begin to well in my eyes. I feel so overwhelmed with joy and relief that it's all I can do not to laugh out loud. I weave my way through the people toward the familiar, willowy figure in the black suit. She stands, arms folded, while two men in uniform speak, pointing at the screen.

‘Mum!’ I say, blowing any hope of cover I had. She doesn’t hear me. ‘Libby!’ I call. She turns and the face that greets me is nothing like I remember. Her pale skin sags over jutting cheekbones. She stares at me with dark, lifeless eyes, blinks, then turns back to the two men.

‘Mum? Mum, it’s me.’

She turns again, closes her eyes for a moment, opens them again. I watch her check the name badge on my chest and turn away again. I am next to her now. I put my hand on her shoulder. The two men with her stop speaking and stare at me.

‘Mum, it’s me, Fin.’

She looks at me. ‘Fin?’ Her voice is a whisper. ‘Is that really you?’

I nod, not really understanding how a mother could not recognise her own son. She excuses herself and steps away from the officers, I follow her. She stands, looking at me with an expression close to fear.

‘Mum?’ I can’t hold onto the tears. They roll down my cheeks. She reaches out and tentatively touches my face.

‘Findlay? Is that really you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh God.’ She wraps her arms around me. ‘Oh my God.’

‘Mum, it’s okay. I’m okay.’ I expect her to cry, but she doesn’t. She pulls away from me.

‘Where’s Max?’

‘He’s okay. He’s safe.’

She glances around nervously. ‘Come with me,’ she says and I follow her into a small room. She points to two plastic chairs. ‘Sit, sit. Are you thirsty? You look thirsty.’ I sit. She takes a bottle of water from a slab of pallets and hands it to me. She sits in the other chair and clutches my free hand while I drink.

‘You don’t know how many times I’ve thought I’d seen you,’ she says. ‘Every tall, dark-haired private has been you. When you called me Mum I thought I was hallucinating. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry.’

She looks at me and I am almost frightened by how old she seems. ‘I sent people for you and Max, but they said you weren’t there. Where is your dad?’

I explain about him and Kara. When I tell her that we have been fending for ourselves she puts her head in her hands. ‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘We’re staying with a whole bunch of people in—’

‘Don’t,’ she cuts me off. ‘I can’t know that. You have to understand, I can’t know.’ She closes her eyes. ‘I would have to tell them. Bring Max here. I’ll organise accommodation for you.’

‘There’s actually four of us, we sort of teamed up with two others to come down here. It was horrible, Mum, there was no more food coming in and they’ve set up barriers to stop people coming down to

the city—'

'I know, Fin.'

I feel stupid. Of course she knows. And then I start to wonder whether the dead look in her eyes isn't just from what she's seen, but from decisions she's made, things she's done.

'I can't help them.'

'But they're kids, Mum. Noll has no one left, his parents were *over there* when the bombs went off. And Lucy has left her family behind, back in the mountains. You know she can't go back there, Mum. Please. She's really… important to me.'

'Fin, darling, I know but I can't help them. I'm sorry.' She stands up. 'Bring Max back here, I'll have something organised.'

'Mum.'

'Fin, look at me. I want to help them. They're children, of course I want to help them. But this—' She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. 'That screen out there, it's showing footage captured by a drone sent into the region where the blasts were. There's nothing left. It's thousands of miles of dust. Whole countries have been obliterated.' She opens her eyes and I can see that she's holding back tears. 'The atmosphere's choked. Electricity substations the world over have been crippled by the temperature drop and the carbon in the atmosphere, there's no more fuel being refined, therefore no transportation for the little food that the world has in reserve. Long term, crops will fail,' she continues. 'Resulting in worldwide famine for those that survive the next twelve months. Fin, we have to make decisions about what portion of the population we can sustain… I can't just… I can't even know their names, I can't do this if I know their names.' She takes another deep breath and squares her shoulders. 'I'm sorry. I can secure you and Max, but beyond that my hands are tied.'

I have no words. I stare at her. This is not what I had imagined. In the brief moments where I had dared to envisage actually finding her I had pictured her sweeping Max, Lucy, Noll and I off to safety, to a haven of inventive strategies for preserving society. What they would look like, I don't know. Wind turbines, cycle-powered generators, communities living off mushrooms grown in the dark, I don't know. I hadn't imagined this calculated surrender. In all those hours spent wondering how the powers that be could do this to people, *their own* people, I never imagined her as being complicit in it all.

She grips both my hands in hers.

'Go,' she says, 'and get Max.'

Thirty-eight

Noll is sitting on the ground where I left him. As I cross the road he gets to his feet, picks his backpack up and puts it over his shoulder.

He reads the expression on my face. 'You didn't find her.'

'No. I did.'

'Really? You look… shattered.'

'Probably 'cause that's how I feel.' I pull my bike up from where I left it lying on the pavement.

'Why? What happened?'

I stand, holding onto the bike like it's the only thing that's keeping me upright. 'She wants me to come back with Max.'

'And? What's wrong?'

I feel the pressure of tears behind my eyes. 'She says she can't help you and Lucy. This whole thing is completely fucked and *she's* part of it. She's working with the military to keep people out of the city. She's onboard with letting half the fucking population starve. If it really even was her. She has the same name but that woman was not my mother. I'm…' I push my fingers through what's left of my hair, scrunch my eyes shut. 'I'm really sorry. She's… I'm sorry.'

I get on the bike and start to pedal. Noll is behind me. 'Fin, stop. Talk to me.'

'What's there to say? I've got a safe haven for me and my brother, but sorry, you can't come? You reckon it'll be that easy with Lucy too?'

Noll smiles.

'Why are you smiling? What is wrong with you?'

'Fin, you found her. You're going to be okay, you and Max.'

'Do not be all Zen about this, Noll. I'm not going to be fine. I'm not bloody going.'

'Yes, you are.'

'No, I'm not. Not without you and definitely not without Lucy.'

'You have to, Fin. Did you really think she'd be able to save us all? I knew the moment we got to the border, when we first met Matt, I knew then it wasn't going to work out that way.'

'Then why come with us?'

'Well, I'm still better off in the city, aren't I? Fin, it's okay. Take Max back to your mum.'

'It's not fucking okay! You're going to starve, Noll, if you don't get caught first. And I can't leave Lucy, I would never, never get over that. No matter how long I live.'

The shopfronts and office buildings flash past as we speed through the streets. Noll doesn't say any more. We hit ANZAC Bridge,

the Golden Gate wannabe that stretches out over the water, linking the CBD with the inner west. I pedal the ascent and my legs scream in protest, we sail down the other side into the city suburbs, the affluent terrace-lined streets strewn with rubbish. I jump the gutter turning a corner and the bike comes down hard, I feel the grind and wobble of my front tyre gone flat.

'Fuck.' I stop, get off the bike, kick it to the ground. 'Fuck, fuck, FUCK!' I pick the thing up and fling it at the nearest wall. I open my lungs and let out the biggest sound I can, screaming until there is nothing left.

'Language, Mr Heath.'

The voice comes from behind us. When I hear it, it's like everything in me stops, the breathing, the blood in my veins, everything. I turn around and there, beneath a mountain of overcoats, is a man.

'Surely, Findlay, it isn't a problem that can't be solved with decorum,' he says wryly. A tear streaks from the corner of his eye and is caught by the thick grey beard.

'Mr Effrez,' I whisper.

'You both look exhausted. Come with me.'

The whole apartment wouldn't be more than thirty square metres, with piles of books and papers crowding the shelves that line every inch of available wall space. The air is thick with the tart scent of cigar smoke. He leads us through the narrow hall into a kitchen the size of a large cupboard. Cans of food are stacked and grouped according to their contents on the bench. Rice is portioned and bagged in individual servings, stored in a clear plastic container. There are also several jars of small fish, which I figure to be anchovies.

'This has been the season for us closet fans of preserved fish,' Effrez says. 'Never had to fight it out for those. Are you gentlemen hungry?'

We both shake our heads. I am still dumfounded by the fact that we are standing in his kitchen. Effrez crouches down and reaches into the back of one of the cupboards. He pulls out a jar.

'Perhaps I can tempt you with some coffee?'

Instant coffee was one of the first things to disappear from supermarket shelves, I can't believe that there's any left in the entire city. Effrez reads my expression and steps away from the cupboard.

'I was very careful to stock up,' he says.

I look down into the cupboard and see rows and rows of jars.

'Never used to drink instant. What ugly creatures this has reduced us all to. Care for a cup of the devil's drink?'

'Yes, sir,' we reply, almost in unison. 'Thank you.'

He takes a saucepan from a hook on the wall and goes into the next room.

'My bathroom has become a fireplace,' he explains. I stick my head in the doorway to see the vanity sink filled with charcoal and ash. Plumes of black soot coat the tiles and mirror above the vanity. A hole is punched through the plaster ceiling above: an improvised chimney. Effrez takes some small pieces of wood from the bathtub and places them in the sink to light a fire.

'I suppose you've noticed that matches are in short supply these days,' he says.

'Yes, sir.'

'I remember reading that we had lost the technology to visit the moon, that if we wanted to go back we'd have to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. I suspect the same is true of matches. We are going to have to rediscover how to conjure fire ourselves.'

'Thank God for *Survivor*, sir,' I say.

'Useful tutorials with people in bikinis building fires,' says Noll.

'Ha, yes.'

He makes us coffee and leads us into the cramped sitting room. The three of us sit and sip our drinks.

'You made it into the city,' Effrez says gravely.

Noll and I explain the situation out west, how we left with Max and Lucy.

'We came to try and find my mum,' I tell Mr Effrez. 'We thought she would be able to help.'

'And did you find her?' he asks.

I don't reply. Noll explains to Effrez that we had just come from seeing my mother when we met him.

'She says she can't do anything for Noll and Lucy.'

'What are you going to do, Fin?' Effrez asks.

'He's going to get Max and go back to her.'

'No I'm not, Noll.'

'You have to, Fin. It's stupid not to.'

'I'm not leaving you and Lucy.'

'And so we come to the moment when I saw you taking out your frustrations on an innocent bicycle,' Effrez says.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. Noll clears his throat.

'I didn't know you lived in the city, sir.'

'Yes. I used to travel all the way up to your fine school purely for the privilege of working in such beautiful surrounds.' He smiles. 'You all took it so much for granted, leaving your Coke cans and chip packets lying all over the place.'

'Yes, sir. We did… Are you here on your own?'

'It appears so, Arnold. My lovely wife relocated to sunny

California with her tennis instructor not long before the missiles. Although I suspect it isn't quite as sunny now.' He looks at me. 'No one has the capacity to disappoint us like our loved ones. Yes. I am on my own, which has made it easier in many ways. This life isn't sustainable, however. Like your mother told you, Findlay, there will be widespread famine if individuals continue to rely on outside sources for food. Have you considered leaving the city?'

'Where would we go, sir?'

'Do you remember in class when I told you about the community that were heading down south, near the Royal National Park? They have set up there. There are lots of feral deer that can be hunted. Place is full of them and they can survive the cold. There's also mines, deep enough to tap into underground water sources.'

'Why haven't you gone with them?' I ask.

Effrez doesn't answer straightaway. He turns his mug around in his hands, eyes downcast.

'My daughter was in Melbourne at university when all this started. She told me she was leaving to come up here. To come home. I was going to take her there with me. She hasn't arrived. Obviously. I can't leave here without her.'

The silence that comes is something I am becoming used to, the grief of not knowing. Effrez stands and takes our mugs into the kitchen.

He shakes our hands when we leave, giving us each a pat on the shoulder. And it seems that while our world has tilted and capsized, not everyone is pushing – some are scrambling to make room for others to cling on.

'Think about what I said,' he says. 'Come back and see me either way.'

As Noll and I walk with our one remaining bike back to the car park. I try to think of what to say to Max when he asks if I found our mother.

The gloaming fades to black.

The moment Noll and I come down the tunnel into the car park Max bolts to us.

'You found her, didn't you? Didn't you? You were gone ages – I figured you must have found her. Was she there?'

I stand there looking at him, my mouth trying to make the words.

'Did you find her?'

'Yes.'

He leaps up and grabs me around the neck. I gently untangle myself from him.

‘Why aren’t you smiling? Why aren’t you happy?’

Lucy’s eyes meet mine. ‘What happened?’

‘Are we going now?’ asks Max.

‘No.’

‘In the morning?’

‘No. Max, please. Settle down.’

‘Why not? You found her, didn’t you?’

‘Max! Just give me some space.’

He frowns and his lip starts to wobble, but he puffs himself up, fighting it.

‘She… she can’t help all of us. She says she can’t help Lucy and Noll.’

‘What? How come?’

‘There’s… it’s complicated. She just…’

Noll steps in, finding the words I can’t get hold of. ‘There’s limited resources. She can help immediate family and that’s it.’

Lucy drops her gaze to her feet. She takes a few steps away and sits down on the ground, drawing her knees up to her chin.

‘We are not splitting up,’ I say. ‘We are not going to do that… We met Mr Effrez, our English teacher—’

‘What?’ Lucy turns around.

‘There’s a community down south, self-sustaining. He thinks we should go down there.’

‘But what about Mum?’ asks Max.

‘I don’t know, Maximum.’

‘I want to see her.’

‘Then I’ll take you in the morning. But Max, she can’t offer you any more than rations and a place to sleep. There’s no future. Even when this passes, there’s going to be famine.’

‘These people in this community,’ says Noll. ‘They’re going to try and sustain themselves away from the system that left us to starve on the other side of the border.’

Max looks at me with his big innocent eyes.

‘But, Mum…’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

Thirty-nine

It is late and Max, Matt and Alan are asleep. Noll, Lucy and I sit by the remains of the campfire, cutting plastic bags into strips and winding them into balls.

'The best thing about going south is it'll give us something to do,' says Noll. 'The worst thing about this is the fact there are no distractions. It's like being locked in your own head on a permanent basis.'

'I would have thought…' I hesitate.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'What? Come on.'

'Well, don't you pray? Doesn't that help, like, occupy your mind?'

'Not exactly leading the most prayerful life at the moment.'

'Why not?'

He smiles sadly. 'It says in the bible that when Jesus is getting crucified, he looks up to the sky, and…' Noll sighs and I see that there are tears in his eyes. The first I have ever seen, even through all the shit he went through at school, even when he told me his parents were dead and he was all alone, I've never seen him cry. 'He says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' Noll tries to laugh. 'We don't use words like forsaken any more. Why is that? All I can think now, when I try to pray is, God, why the fuck have you forsaken us? We're just fucking kids, Christ was Christ, he could take it, but us? Why the fuck would you forsake a bunch of kids? And Fin, you really, really shouldn't swear at God.'

I swallow hard, feeling the ache of tears behind my own eyes.

'I think He can take it, Noll.'

His tears start to spill. 'I don't want to die. I'm *afraid* to die. My parents willingly stayed in a place they knew would be destroyed. They waited for their deaths, they didn't run away to save themselves. Look at me. I stole food from another man and here I am scrambling around in a car park,' he motions to the twine in his hands, 'trying to hold onto this world, this screwed-up world.'

'I don't think you should feel guilty about being scared,' says Lucy. 'You said that God doesn't want this. Doesn't that make it okay to be scared?'

Noll keeps talking, I'm not sure if he has even heard her.

'I really don't want to die. And, you know, it's ironic because for ages I did want to. I used to come home from school and scope out places where I could hang myself.'

'Shit, Noll.'

He laughs a little. ‘Now look at me.’

‘Noll, don’t stop praying,’ I say. ‘Please don’t stop praying for us, Noll. Please.’ Maybe it’s because I’ve just witnessed my mother give up every principle I thought she believed in. I don’t think I can handle Noll caving. I can’t. But the idea that we are the wisest beings in existence is terrifying, like Lucy said. Maybe I’ve developed a faith in God that is second-hand, I need Noll to hang onto it.

‘I’m sorry, Noll. About all the horrible things you went through at school,’ says Lucy.

He smiles. ‘Oh, it’s okay. It made me what I am, gold that’s tested in fire and all that,’ he says glibly. ‘I used to ask God to save me from that as well.’

‘Well, He kind of did,’ I say. ‘Might have been overkill, though.’

‘Yeah, nuclear holocaust wasn’t really what I had in mind.’

‘Noll, I’m serious,’ says Lucy.

‘I know you are. Funny, but sometimes I almost prefer this. At least I’m not alone in this particular version of hell.’

Later I lie beside Lucy and grip her hand.

‘I’m sorry about your mum,’ she says.

‘So am I. I just can’t get my head around the fact that she is part of all this.’

‘Maybe she was just doing what she had to. There really isn’t enough for everyone.’

‘Why not? We kind of created this for ourselves, society, I mean. We created a way of life totally dependent on outside sources: electricity, transport. She’s been researching this for years, this kind of disaster. She would have known that our total way of life was precarious. And what does she do? She buys me an iPhone and moves in with her boyfriend.’

‘Are you saying she should have been teaching you to grow vegetables or something?’

‘I don’t freakin’ know. She should have done something.’

‘Like what, though? Taught you Morse code instead of buying you a phone? She didn’t know *this* was coming. If anyone said it was going to be a bloody nuclear apocalypse we would have thought they were paranoid or crazy.’

‘Do you remember that last day at school when you asked what Mr Effrez was yelling about in homeroom and Lokey said he was talking about hippies starting a commune?’

‘They’re the same people? In the national park?’

‘Yeah. They knew this was coming. You’re right. We thought they were nuts, we mocked them. Why, do you think?’

She is quiet for a minute, thinking. ‘Because the alternative was

terrifying. The thought that this seriously could happen was too frightening to contemplate. It's like those people out in the ration line complaining about people from over the border taking their share. They have to believe that we're greedy, 'cause the idea that we were actually left to starve is just too awful.'

We lie in silence for a while. I listen to the sounds of the camp settling around us, as familiar to me now as home.

'You know, I wouldn't blame you, if you wanted to go with your mum,' says Lucy.

'I'm not leaving you. It would be a truly shit life anyway.'

'How do you know it will be any better down south in the settlement?'

'You'll be with me.'

She nudges me. 'You're a total sucker, you know that?'

'Yeah, I'm aware of that.'

Lucy props her head up on her hand. I gaze at her face in the dying light of the campfire.

'I love you, you know,' I whisper.

'I know.' She leans over and kisses me.

'And I know you don't need me to, but I will try and protect you.'

'I know.'

In the morning we rise and prepare breakfast like every other morning. Only the mood is more subdued than usual. Max, who usually buoys everyone with inane facts from *National Geographic* or lame jokes, is silent. He sits beside Noll to eat his breakfast.

Alan doesn't get up from his bed. I take him some tea. His eyes are closed. I talk to him softly to wake him up, but he doesn't move.

'Alan? Al, wake up.' I touch my fingers to his forehead. It is cold. I sit down on the concrete next to him and feel myself starting to break apart inside. I'm not sure how long I stay there. When Lucy comes over, my face is saturated. She puts her arms around me and my whole body shakes. People come and stand by Alan's bed and cry. I can't move. I stay there with him. It's Noll that comes and pulls the sheet up over his face.

'We'll take him away,' he says. 'Lucy and I will take him.'

'No. I'll come.'

In the night we leave Max with Matt and Rosa at the camp and Noll, Lucy and I carry Alan's body up the ramp out of the car park. We walk through the streets for what seems like miles. Then we come to the harbour.

To be there in a place that used to be so alive with light and colour and sound, to be there in utter darkness, is the most surreal

experience of my entire life. Thick, impenetrable darkness all around, our torch light insignificant against the swallowing black – it feels like being in a wilderness. Even though you can't see the buildings, you can feel their presence towering over us. And it's so, so quiet. For almost two centuries this place has been smothered by the noise of people and their stuff: cars, buses, ferries, trains, conversations, music, inane PA announcements about train tickets, sirens, footsteps, buskers, beggars, street sweepers, garbage trucks. All of that has now been silenced. And all that is left is the lapping of water in the harbour. Now we stand at its edge, on the walkway lined with abandoned takeaway food vendors, ice-cream shops, and souvenir shops with smashed windows. If we could see them, the Harbour Bridge would be almost directly in front of us, and the Opera House on our right.

The three of us grip the white sheet that wraps Alan's body. We know what we have to do, but the act of actually throwing somebody, somebody that you care about, into deep, dark water feels almost impossible. Even when we all know he is long gone already.

'On three,' I say. 'One, two, three.'

We drop Alan's body into lapping, undulating darkness and I watch the white sheet dance and swirl as he disappears. No-one moves for a long time. We stand and gaze at the water – the rhythmic roll and swell of its surface – and I realise that there is something soothing in the way it still moves the same way as it did before, back when the world was so different.

Forty

Max sits on his bed, plucking lint from the blanket. I sit down beside him.

'I'll take you to see Mum.'

He nods, not looking at me.

'She's going to want you to stay with her. She won't want you to come south. You have to do what you want to do, okay? Don't be pushed into anything.'

He shrugs.

'I know it's hard. I'm sorry it's turned out this way.'

He looks at me. 'Do you think Dad is dead?'

'Dad?'

'Yeah. Do you think he's dead?'

'Honestly?'

'Yeah.' He now holds my gaze, unwavering.

'I think… I think if he was still alive he would have found a way to get back to us, at home. I think he might have died trying. Maybe he crashed the car. That's honestly what I think.'

Max bites his lip.

'I know that we can't stay here. And I know that Mum can only help you and me. And even if we did stay with her, what she could do for us is minimal. In the long term… I think we're better off to leave. But it's up to you, Maximum.' I try to mask the fault-line in my voice. 'I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do.'

Max and I have to double on Noll's bike. I don't know if it's because it's so slow or maybe it's just because Max is with me, but it feels way more exposed and vulnerable than when I crossed the city with Noll. The only people who are out on the streets are men and their cold stares follow us as we pass. I do have the gun, still. And the possibility of using it doesn't feel like as much of an abstract concept any more.

When we finally make it there, I leave the bike leaning against the fence in front of Town Hall. The soldier at the gates glares at me like he wants to give us a parking fine.

'We're Libby Streeton's kids,' I tell him. 'She's expecting us.'

The soldier has obviously been told that we would show up because instead of pointing his gun at me he looks us up and down then says something into his two-way radio. He listens to the response and opens the gates, motioning us in with a jerk of his head.

We walk into the busy foyer. My mother rushes over to us, one hand over her mouth. She pulls Max into her arms. He loses it then,

sobbing into her shirt.

'It's okay, sweetie,' she says, stroking his hair. 'You're safe now. Come with me, both of you.'

She leads us into an adjoining room, a different one to last time. There is a table covered with papers and manila folders, she picks one up and shuffles through it.

'You will stay with me at Government House. There's accommodation for officials' families—'

'I'm not staying with you,' I tell her.

She looks up from the papers. 'What do you mean?'

'You said you can't help Lucy and Noll. I'm going to stay with them. We're leaving the city together.'

'Findlay, you are coming with me. We spoke about this.'

I try to explain to her about the settlement but she just shakes her head, pushing my words away.

'We talked about this, Fin. You are safe now.'

'Bullshit! You said so yourself about the lack of resources and the famine that's coming. No one is safe. Not here, not living in a freakin' office building. I don't care how many guys with machine guns you've got around.'

'You're scaring Max.'

'*I'm* scaring Max? You don't think that maybe it's the people out there killing each other over a packet of cigarettes that are scaring him? We've seen people on the borders, the borders you put up, shot in the head. And you think I'm scaring him?'

'Fin,' she pleads. 'We've talked about this. You know there's nothing I can do—'

'I'm not staying with you. And you have to let Max decide whether he's going to or not.'

She looks at my brother. He swallows, wiping at his tears with the back of his hands.

'I want to go with Fin.'

'No, no, no, no. You're coming with me, both of you.' She clutches at Max's hands.

'Mum, no. We're not.' I ignore the tears tracking down my cheeks. I put a hand on Max's shoulder.

'I want to go with Fin.'

'You can't. Fin, please. Please.'

'Do you really think this is what's best for us? You know it's not.'

She covers her mouth, closing her eyes. I step toward her and kiss her on the cheek. She wraps her arms around me and then Max. She holds onto us with a grip I have never felt before. She lets out a wail, an animal sound that feels like it could split my chest apart. Someone else comes into the room, tries to steady her as her legs give way and

she crumples to the floor, her whole body is shuddering with sobs.

I crouch next to her and she gathers Max and I to her chest again. She presses her nose into our hair. She holds us there for the longest time.

We begin rolling our bedding into tight bundles, selecting what will be left behind. It will be harder to fit everything in the car with one extra person.

Matt sits on the floor, arms wrapped around his legs. He nods when I tell him we are going.

'You're coming with us,' I say.

'Nah, really, it's okay.'

'You're coming with us.'

Matt reckons the only place we're going to find any petrol is in the tank of an army truck. He changes into his uniform, tells the rest of us to wear as much black as possible.

'No Swannies beanie, then?' Max says. I don't think Matt gets it.

I use my best negotiating skills to try to convince Max to stay behind. But short of physically tying him to a concrete pillar, it's impossible.

'You do what you're told, yeah?' I warn him.

'I think you'll be surprised how useful I can be on this operation,' he counters.

'Just don't be a dickhead, Max.'

Noll and Matt come with me to collect the hose pipe, torches and a crowbar from the car. I open the boot and Matt takes out his assault rifle, slings it across his back. Then I open the front door, take the handgun from under the passenger seat and tuck it into my jeans.

'Haven't we already been through this?' says Noll.

I sigh, hand him the gun. 'What are you going to do with it, anyway? Throw it at someone?'

'My granddad had a farm. He taught me how to shoot.'

I raise an eyebrow.

'Asians can have farms too, you know.'

'I'm more worried about the fact he taught you to shoot with a handgun.'

'Okay, so it was a rifle. Same principle. And I've still got more experience than you.'

'Whatevs.'

Noll tucks the gun into his belt.

We leave the car park and enter the street wordlessly, like a flock

of mourners from a graveyard. The moonless sky is a black void above us. We have two torches and we follow their tentative beams through the dark, empty streets. We pass beneath the looming multi-storey apartment blocks, between clusters of townhouses. Matt says the last time he was out here a small military station was set up in a big park a few blocks east. We follow him through a lifeless intersection and along a row of abandoned shopfronts. Lucy is beside me, Max next to her and up ahead, Noll follows a metre behind Matt. We walk in silence and approach another intersection. I step out on to the road and see the pool of ice next to the kerb a moment too late to warn Lucy. She steps right on it and, with a yelp, her legs slide from beneath her and she is on the ground.

'Luce? Shit. Are you okay?'

She grimaces, grips her left ankle, the same one that was hurt during the riot. She takes my arm and tries to stand. Fails. She kicks at the ground with her heel in frustration. Max and I help her to her feet, Max enjoying the process a bit too much for my liking. Lucy tries to take a step and I can feel her tense up with the pain.

'Go. Get fuel. I'll wait here.'

'I don't think so.' I look toward Noll and Matt. 'I'll have to help her back.'

'Absolutely,' says Noll.

'No. No. I'm fine. You go.'

'As if, Luce. C'mon.' She can barely put weight on her leg. I bring her arm over my shoulder and hold her waist firmly.

'Max,' I say. 'You have to do exactly as Matt and Noll tell you, yeah?'

Max nods, taking the hose pipe from me.

'You got him?' I ask Noll.

'Definitely.'

'All good,' Matt says. 'You take her back.'

Lucy and I turn and hobble our way back along the street. I take a look back over my shoulder and see the three of them, Matt, Noll and Max, walking into the darkness. No more than shadows.

All our things are packed, so I sit Lucy in the car. Rosa brings a box for her to prop her foot up on.

'I'm so sorry,' Lucy says. 'This is so pathetic. It really does hurt. I'm not just being a sooky girl. You know that, don't you?'

'Luce, this just gives me a chance to get back a bit of dignity.'

I dig a blanket out of the boot and put it under her heel. We sit in the car and wait. Rosa fusses over Lucy, brings us cups of hot tea. Then I hear the slap of feet on bitumen as someone comes bolting down the ramp into the car park. I look up and when I see him there

are no words to describe the sound that comes from me.

Max's hands are bloody. It's smeared on his face and all over his clothes. His jeans are soaked through as if he's been kneeling in the snow.

'What happened?' I pull open his jacket and look over him. His jumper is soaked crimson. 'Where are you hurt? WHERE ARE YOU HURT? Fuck. FUCK.'

He shakes his head, pulling his jacket closed. Rosa is hysterical, shrieking. I actually push her out of the way. Some people come over to see what is going on; one of them brings a blanket, wraps it around Max, saying something about shock. I pull off Max's beanie and tilt his head forward, back, side to side. There doesn't seem to be any cuts. He's looking at me like his eyes aren't quite focused, like he can't see me properly.

'What's happened? Where are Noll and Matt? Max, talk to me.'

Lucy is next to us, God knows how she got there. It's only when she tells me to try to calm down that I realise I have been shouting. By the time we get Max to the car there is a small crowd of people gathered around us.

'Where are they, Max? Just tell us where they are.'

When I was ten, I left my bike in the rain. The wheel spokes turned orange-brown with rust. It got on my hands, it got on my clothes.

The snow that Matt and Noll lie on is the same colour. There is an army truck a few metres away, the driver's door is open. Next to it is the dark shape of a body on the ground. Someone has covered Matt's face with a towel and from the bloom of colour around his head I know there is no point looking under it. I go to Noll. His eyes are open, staring up into the sky. I kneel on the snow beside him. He is so still I think he is already gone, but his eyes shift and look directly at me. I yank the gloves from one of his hands and grip it in mine. He blinks at me and opens his mouth. It's then that I see the bullet hole in the chest of his coat. Deep red pooling on the heavy fabric. I tear off my jacket and press it down over the hole, that's all I can do.

'Noll, Noll, don't leave us. Hang on.'

The expression on his face is more of mild curiosity than anything else. Surprise more than panic. He says something and I lean closer to him to hear.

'I'm going home.'

'Noll, no, no. You're okay. You're going to be okay.'

He is still looking at me. But he is not there. There is nothing left in him. I feel for his pulse.

There is nothing.

I sit in the snow. I don't know for how long. Eventually I get up, go to the body next to the truck. It is face down, head turned to the side, eyes closed. It is a woman in army fatigues. I stand there looking at her, then kneel down to see if she has a pulse. She doesn't. I look around. Nothing, but still, silent black. I turn and as I am walking back, past the end of the truck, I see it, clipped on the back door. A fuel container. As I grasp the cold handle and lift it from its bracket I can feel the weight of it. Full.

Lucy doesn't cry. Neither do I. Shock. She doesn't ask about the fuel. Max watches wordlessly as I fill up our car. He is white and has vomited onto the concrete twice. His hands shake too much to hold a cup steady and Rosa comes over, crouches next to him and holds a cup of warm tea to his lips. Lucy opens the back of the car and starts pulling things out. Noll's things. She unzips his bag, riffles through it, pulls out two thick woollen jumpers, some pants, and the most crucial of all items, socks. She places them in our bags.

She sorts through the rest of Noll's possessions, leaves them in his bag. Except for his bible. I take it from her and turn it in my hands. The cover is worn and scratched, most of the gold lettering worn away. Inside, the delicate pages are scrawled with notes: Noll's writing crammed into the narrow margins. I put the book under the front seat of the car.

Lucy and I help Max to his feet and I begin to peel his clothes off him: coat, jumper, shirt. He starts to cry and the sound of his sobbing is unbearable. His head hangs and the tears run down his chin. I have a memory of him, as a child, a toddler in a bib holding my mother's hand. When there is only one layer of clothing left he reaches around to the back of his jeans. Then he holds the gun out to me.

We leave soon after. I retrace the route Noll and I took from Mr Effrez's house. The three of us are silent in the car, until a few blocks from Effrez's house, when Max speaks.

'We got to an army truck in the park. Matt told us to hang back behind a wall. He went up to the driver's side and the driver got out. I couldn't hear what Matt said to her. I could only see because there was a light in the cabin. Whatever Matt said, she mustn't have fallen for it. He pointed his gun at her. That's when Noll yelled out. He told Matt to stop, ran toward them and pulled the handgun out. He didn't even point it at her, but the army woman, she didn't hesitate… she… she shot Noll…' Max's body starts to shake, tears tracking down his cheeks. He shakes his head like he is frustrated by the crying. 'I guess Matt shot her then. She fell in the snow. Matt looked over to me. Then he put the gun to his head and shot himself.'

I grip the steering wheel hard to stop shaking. I can't. I can only see Noll in primary school, standing among the shards of glass, blood dripping from his forehead.

I stop the car out the front of Mr Effrez's house. It's pretty clear that Max is too much of a mess to get out. Lucy stays with him and I go up the path to the front door. I can't help but worry that I'll find Effrez dead as well, it seems to be my new habit. My luck isn't quite that bad, though. Effrez opens the door and gives me a wide smile, something I have never witnessed before.

'You came back,' he says, leading me into the lounge.

'Yeah' is all I can manage to say. He must have noticed the defeat in my voice because he stops and turns around.

'What's wrong?'

'Noll. He's dead.'

He doesn't say anything for a moment, just stands there looking at me. Then he turns around and walks through to the lounge. He motions to a seat and I take it.

'Well, that's… that's just appalling news.'

Effrez crouches down and opens a small cupboard beneath the window. I realise it's a safe. He pulls out a bottle and takes a glass from the cabinet that stands where most would have a television. He pours a glass of the thin, golden liquid and hands it to me. I take a sip, it scorches my throat.

'What happened? Did he get sick? He seemed well when he was here.'

'No. I don't know exactly. He was shot.'

'Shot?'

I tell Effrez what happened, about our search for fuel and Max running back covered in blood.

'This just happened?'

I nod.

'Where is your brother?'

'He's in the car, out front.'

'And you're going to go south? Now?'

'Yes.'

'You're in shock. You're not driving. Bring Lucy and your brother inside. You will stay the night, sleep. Go in the morning.'

His offer is not negotiable.

Effrez brings a double mattress into the living room. It fills the entire floorspace. The three of us will squish together on it, with some cushions stuffed down the side for extra width. I don't know if it's his mattress or where he plans to sleep if it is. I imagine him hanging upside down from the ceiling like a bat.

He heats two cans of spaghetti over the fireplace in his bathroom sink. He has cheese, which he grates over the top and it's the most delicious thing any of us has eaten in months. The three of us sit cross-legged on the mattress. Effrez doesn't talk, just watches us eat and then takes the bowls away when we are done. He returns with a notepad and pen.

'I will give you the directions on how to get to the settlement. I also have a letter that I wish you to give to my friends when you arrive. There are six of them there plus others whom I don't know. I will write my friends' names down for you, you're not likely to remember them if I tell you now, you look much too exhausted to remember your own names.'

It is past midnight by the time we get to bed. I fall asleep after what feels like hours. When I wake up sunlight is streaming through the window. I hear a loud knock at the door and get out of bed, careful not to wake Lucy and Max. I open the front door and feel the warm sunlight on my face, so bright that I have to shield my eyes. There are three people standing there: Noll, Alan and my father. They smile at me.

Then I wake to the gloomy half-light of the early morning.

Before we leave, Effrez hugs me tightly, then gives me a firm handshake.

'Will you have enough fuel?'

I nod. 'Can you please come with us?'

He shakes his head. 'I cannot do that,' he says. 'Are you driving, Lucinda?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then I will not fear. You all take care, won't you? I will be thinking of you.'

I weave the car through the streets, out of the city and into the southern suburbs. We reach the barricade. It is manned by a single army officer who opens it as we approach. There is no issue with letting people out of the city. We follow the highway and the houses become trees. The headlights throw yellow light on the road in front of us and it occurs to me that it has been much easier to see on this drive than it was on the way down.

'It's stopped snowing,' I say.

'You're right,' murmurs Lucy.

Above us, the light is trying to push its way into the sky. It is still thick with grey, but it seems higher than it was before. The landscape unfurls on either side of the road, acres and acres of gently undulating scrub, broken only by large clusters of eucalypts. The greens and

browns of the vegetation are less vivid than I have seen before and the gumtrees don't look as strong as they were, as if the colour from their leaves has bled into the sky. But they are still standing, still reaching up. Waiting.

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I'LL TELL YOU MINE
Pip Harry

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